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Man Into Beast

Man Into Beast

STRANGE TALES OF TRANSFORMATION
SELECTED, EDITED, AND WITH A PREFACE
BY A. C. SPECTORSKY

Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York

1947

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Preface

It would be hard to say exactly when and why the idea for this book took shape. What forces, what small impulses and accidents of environment, what minuscule effects of heredity, determine a man's many interests and then keep some alive and let others perish? From an early age, tales of transformation have intrigued me. As a child, I doted on them. I also wanted to be a cowboy. My interest in stories of metamorphosis is still strong today; my ambition to be a cowhand is gone.

One might say, then, that the origins of this volume are to be found in my childhood preference for stories of metamorphosis, which, for some reason, persisted long after other interests, like roping steers, disappeared. More immediately, though, this book owes its beginning to several discussions with two friends, a psychiatrist (or rather, as he says, analyst) and an anthropologist.

One summer night, strolling along the shores of Lake Michigan, the three of us discovered that our aimless talk had taken a fixed direction. We had been walking for perhaps an hour, idly chatting, when one of the other two, I forget which, commenting on something I'd said about an acquaintance of ours who had monkey-like traits, averred that there was a compulsive quality inherent in persisting myths—one of those easy and sonorous generalities which grace such occasions—and went on to ask if I thought, in some deep area of my mind, that our simian acquaintance would (in the intensification of traits which accompanies getting older) actually become a monkey.

This interested me; I chose to accept the question as serious and unrhretorical, and before long we were at it, hammer and tongs (to coin a phrase), in a discussion of metamorphosis.

The transformation of human beings into animals, it became apparent during our talks, is a persisting element in the myths of all the peoples of the earth. The anthropologist assured us that since earliest times and in all cultures this idea has had a lasting place in mankind's life of the imagination.

It seemed especially interesting to us, as we pursued the subject, to discover that, with the passing of supernatural explanations for observed phenomena and with the somewhat slower passing of a belief in the supernatural, the myth had not died. The idea of metamorphosis has continued to intrigue the mind of man and to play a part in literature.

My own interest in such stories had run a parallel course to the historic one on which the anthropologist expanded. (Who was it who first made reference to the correspondence of ontogeny phylogeny?) My concern with fairy-tale transformations and sorcerers' metamorphoses died a little before my desire to be a cowboy was born, but my interest in the subject of metamorphosis persisted, through plainsman days, and led me, while in college and after, to "collect," as it were, stories of metamorphosis, modern and ancient.

That night, while the three of us walked and talked, while

the analyst discoursed on and about and in and around and through the subject (using words like totemism and other samples of technical jargon to flavor his talk), and while the anthropologist entertained us with astounding, or merely curious, accounts of primitive tribes among whom metamorphosis is not only a part of folk belief but a strong religious element—during that time I was able to contribute only the retelling of some of the stories of metamorphosis I'd come upon.

Some time later, perhaps a few weeks (during which the subject came up among us again), I sat down and from memory made up a sort of bibliography of stories of metamorphosis. And after that, over a period of about a year, while in libraries or in conversation with bibliophiles, I added to the list. And one day I got the idea of actually collecting these stories into a volume for the delectation and entertainment of anyone whose interest or curiosity might lead him to read such a book.

There was a welter, a plethora, of material to choose from. My original intention was to follow a historical or chronological plan starting with the retelling of early myths and those of antiquity still told by primitive tribes. There would follow oriental fairy tales, Greek and Roman pre-Christian religious myths, magical metamorphoses from medieval European fairy tales for children, and songs, poems, folk stories, and superstitious parables for grownups. The book was to go on, exhaustively, through the dawn of the scientific age and the stories of metamorphosis that continued to be written with supernatural "explanations" and then on to modern stories of metamorphosis, which either used the idea to make a point or offered pseudo-scientific, "amazing" theories for strange transformations, right on up to and through the shaggy, or talking, dog story of today. This plan was abandoned rather quickly, however, when, one day, I stopped thinking about the proposed book and began to think about its readers.

I realized, then, that such an anthology would be a specialist's book. It would be pedantically interesting, but hardly inviting to the reader with no prior interest in the subject. I

looked over the table of contents I'd assembled and reconsidered each story as though it were to appear in a modern magazine in competition with other stories for reader attention. My new criterion left me with far fewer stories, since I selected only those which seemed to me to stand up as *stories*, regardless of the fact that they shared a common theme. At this point I still had a wealth of stories to choose from and felt pretty confident that the necessities imposed by limitation of space would result in a volume comprising the cream of the crop. I felt I was ready to go ahead, confident that the correct formula had been found. But my two friends (who had by this time taken a kind of paternal, gadfly interest in the book which made me feel, now and then, that I had been metamorphosed into a performing animal who was being put through his paces by exacting masters) were not satisfied. And they convinced me that I wasn't either.

The whole "thing" about stories of metamorphosis, they assured me, was belief. Unless the story convinced its audience that a metamorphosis actually occurred, the effectiveness was lost. I objected that they had set me an impossible gauge, since, however convincing a writer might be, his skill could not possibly overcome the scientific skepticism and the common sense of modern readers. But the more I thought of what they had said, the more I realized that they were right.

So again I scrapped my table of contents and prepared to winnow out all but those stories which had three qualities whose presence was to be mandatory for inclusion in the book. First, the story must be told with such skill as to disarm and bemuse the reader before a metamorphosis took place, so that his modern, skeptical caution would be in abeyance, and he would be ready and able to "co-operate," experiencing what Coleridge called "a willing suspension of disbelief." Second, there must be no supernatural explanation of the metamorphosis; it must seem "natural" and real. Furthermore, and by the same reasoning, there were to be no werewolves, dragons, wizards, et cetera. Third, only those stories would be included

in which the author, whether his story was humorous and light or darkly portentous, had attempted to do more than merely tell a story, had succeeded, in fact, in imparting a truth about the world and the beasts (human and inhuman) who walk it, had been not merely instructive in this respect, but illuminating in a way that might be impossible were his story concerned with ordinary human beings. With this plan, I began all over again. I found, to my surprise, that my triple test, plus the original two criteria of fine storytelling and a capacity to interest the casual, non-scholarly, modern reader, had cut my book down to ten tales. I complained of this to my taskmasters. Their response was refreshing.

"It seems to me," said the anthropologist, with a great show of condescending patience, "that I've read quite a few books by only one author. I must say that ten doesn't seem too few to me."

The analyst said, "Don't be rigid, young man. You seem stable enough to abandon the security of custom. The fact that most anthologies have many selections, lots of excerpts, lots of unsatisfying bits and pieces, mustn't deter you." He said more, about self-induced frustration via imaginary obstacles, among other things, and would have suggested, I am sure, that my feelings about my mother and father had a lot to do with it. But I went back to work, to a rereading of the ten tales of metamorphosis, and thus cut off what might have proved an interesting impromptu analysis of my psychic organization.

Here, then, are ten stories of metamorphosis by modern masters. They are not going to be accorded a scholarly preface, since the intention of this book is neither to display erudition nor to instruct, but only to please and entertain. For such a purpose, a pedantic, analytical discussion of the origins, psychological meaning, history, and persistence of the metamorphosis myth is out of place. The anatomical dissection of a joke does not make one laugh; the scientific explanation of sunset colors lacks their aesthetic stimulus; the man who thrills

at the sight of a soaring hawk will not thrill more if the dry voice of pedantry mutters in his ear that the bird's name is *Beauteo borealis*.

None of the authors here represented has chosen to dress up his tale in ancient garb, any more than a good modern artist would imitate Rubens or Giotto, or a modern composer write in the style of Bach or Schuetz. So there is no neo-supernaturalism here, but only the honest recital of strange transformations. And all of these authors know and understand the function of narrative, which is to show, rather than to tell, merely, as description does.

A few words about each story, and then, Reader, you will be left in the hands of far better and more interesting writers.

"The Adventures of Professor Emmett" is not only one of my favorites, but it seems, each time I read it, to tell me more. The shy and introverted entomologist, whose unfortunate marriage to a shallow woman makes him retire further into himself and into the insect world which is his academic concern, is a sympathetic and interesting character. His relations with men, women, and beasts are amusingly and sharply portrayed. But it is when he makes the ultimate retreat that he takes, in a sense, his first step forward. His innate and submerged greatness and heroism come to the fore, and it is in this part of a tale of delight, humor, pathos, and deep feeling that Hecht tells us, better than he could in an expository essay, that there is an inner core of greatness in every man and that, stripped of the shams and restrictions of human existence, this better self emerges.

"Green Thoughts," by John Collier, is primarily a conceit, an entertaining tour de force which provides an inverted kind of catharsis to take the place of the Roman circus. It has an openhanded cruelty and malice which are this author's own. Here is a fine sample of delectable meanness.

Robert Ayre's "Mr. Sycamore" is a story of faith and deep humanity. It is truer than it is realistic; it is profoundly touch-

ing. Saki's "Laura" is, as one would expect from him, waspishly entertaining. "The Monkey," by Isak Dinesen, is hard to describe. It has, in its prose and in its scene, a bare, Gothic grandeur, and it evokes, in its dark and frigidly exotic story, the same sort of raffish-romantic violence which shows in the faces of Holbein's Teutonic Knights.

Underneath the amusing story which Stephen Vincent Benét tells in "The King of the Cats" is an illuminating insight into that part of our natures which is lonely, feline, and nocturnal. In "Mr. Limpet," Theodore Pratt uses a surprising metamorphosis to explore the special joys of complete irresponsibility. For those who are married and occasionally feel oppressed by marital ties and duties this story will have a particular appeal, for in it they will experience, if only vicariously, the richly joyous sense that comes with the kind of total freedom only to be found in daydreams of gay bachelorhood.

Dorothy Sayers explores an ancient idea in "The Cyprian Cat." The belief that a human being's life is closely linked to that of an animal whose body the human soul occupies while the human body sleeps, with the two lives dependent on each other, and both beings merging in death, is as ancient as storytelling and older than history. Hugh Walpole's "Tarnhelm" explores the same field, quite differently.

The last story in the book is Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis." There has been much erudition expended on this strange, terrifying, and heartbreaking work; none of it has succeeded in enhancing nor damaging the story as Kafka wrote it. Its prose is limpidly clear. A child can understand it. A child might be amused by the story, and wise men weep when they read it. It seems to me presumptuous to comment on it, or try to "explain" it.

One more word—it is the privilege of critics (and occasionally they seem to think of it as a duty) to discuss collections in terms of omissions as well as inclusions. For these folk, and for all this book's readers, I would like to recommend two stories which I would have liked very much to include here. They are, first, David Garnett's beautiful and haunting small

book, *Lady into Fox*, and second, Thorne Smith's wonderfully comical (and in spots sadly profound) *The Stray Lamb*. Permission to use them or any part of them was denied, at any price.

So—with apologies to Satan, who became a serpent, Proteus, who became lots of things; Daphne, who became a tree; Koschei, who became lots of things including an egg; Curoi, who became a cloud; and the children of that ancient Irishman Lir (Lear, to the English), who became swans—I give you ten modern authors and their strange stories of metamorphosis.

A. C. Sectorsky

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The Adventures of Professor Emmett¹

BY BEN HECHT

Little Gifford was born on a December morning of the year 1902, in an old brick house that stood in the second nicest residential section of a small Wisconsin town. At the moment, the town was covered with snow, and in its streets lonely figures, booted and mittened, were prowling about in a blizzard. Under the cold beat of the wind, the Emmett house stood quilted and turreted with snow, its windows and doors half obliterated. In a bedroom too cold either for amour or for its public sequel, Mrs. Emmett lay doing her best to persuade little Gifford to take his place in a larger world.

After some seven violent hours, Mrs. Emmett finally triumphed, and little Gifford appeared, refusing to breathe or offer any tell-tale signs of life. His efforts to outwit the new and the horrible by a possum-like unconsciousness availed

¹From *A Book of Miracles*. Copyright, 1939, by Ben Hecht. Reprinted by permission of The Viking Press, Inc., New York.

him nothing. The family doctor, a canny old gentleman aware of the ruses of the newborn, belabored little Gifford's bottom with a stout palm. Then he shook and rattled him about as if he were no more than a dollar alarm clock to be jarred into ticking. Eventually a tiny moan rewarded the scientist's work, and Gifford Emmett was declared officially in the land of the living.

At this vital and sensitive moment, a disastrous thing happened. The street door of the Emmett house was flung open, and eleven adolescents ranging in age from twelve to sixteen entered as if they were the spirit of the blizzard outside. They came in howling and prancing and fell to rolling on the floor and assaulting each other with snowballs scraped from each other's shoes and hair. Five of these arrivals were the moaning little Gifford's brothers and sisters. The other six were a species of local self-elected orphans who preferred the Emmett home to their own as an arena for feats of strength and budding musical talents.

The opening of the Emmett street door let in a wintry blast that scampered icily up the stairs and into the accouchement chamber. And since none of the eleven arrivals could find time to close the door, the wintry blast grew wintrier. It swirled and steamed up the stairs, and little Gifford, but recently induced to breathe, found himself swept by such frigid currents that he turned instantly blue and began to shake as if with palsy. He wailed once and then fell into that stoical, powerless silence that marked his demeanor for life.

There is no doubt but that little Gifford's aversion to life was fully developed when the forceps seized him. The opening of the door, the wintry blasts, the horrifying shouts of laughter, and the sounds of furniture toppling were merely details that instantly and forever verified his already full-blown conviction that he had been cast out of the best of all possible worlds into a nowhere.

Biologically, the facts are that little Gifford was the fruit of an unexpected and autumnal flicker of parenthood. Mrs. Emmett had conceived in her forty-third year, to the disquiet

of her husband, himself nearing sixty. And though little Gifford had emerged a fine infant, with a full quota of appendages, it is fairly good science to conclude that he had been put together a little tiredly. The elderly genes and chromosomes laboring at his fashioning had sighed at their work. And that cymbal crash of life that inspires the newborn to shed its larval soul fell on tired ears with little Gifford, if he heard it at all.

Whatever world he had been born into, it is likely that Gifford would have bloomed as a psychosis rather than a sultan. Still the Emmett home did have its share in the non-development of little Gifford's human side. There was no room or role for this laggard little guest in the firmly established hullabaloo of mixed quartets, juvenile sports, and endless riotings that were the routine of this Wisconsin ménage. Gifford had arrived too late to be of any use or interest to anybody. For his mother, no new activities focused on his crib. His father instituted no new regime for his sake. Nobody breathed or kissed or fondled an ego into his consciousness. His brothers and sisters regarded him with the perfunctory interest they had for all creatures who fitted into neither football squads nor wrestling tournaments, to say nothing of moonlight singing.

And from his first weeks little Gifford exhibited the detachment of one who knows himself an interloper. He allowed himself quietly to be stowed away in attics and back bedrooms and other distant culs-de-sac where the banjo and piano banging and other alarums of adolescence could not reach to break his hypothetical slumbers. He suffered sudden drafts, hunger, and terror, without even the little comment at his command. And during such naps as he was able to steal amid the hurly-burly of the household, he dreamed happily of that land of warmth and plenty from which, like a peri, he had been expelled.

And so Gifford grew into a sober and unprotesting infant, well shapen but enigmatic. Soon he shuffled about on hands and knees, doing his best to avoid flying missiles, charging feet, and other hazards of life. He had no interest in living, but

his intelligence had not yet encompassed the idea of suicide. In his second winter, he seemed to all the Emmetts but one a model child. He had by that time completely abandoned his small struggle to become part of life. No music or laughter could lure him now from his seclusion. He haunted the unwanted corners of the house, sitting on the floor and staring tirelessly into space with a sort of oriental calm. When summer came, he crawled into the currant patch behind the house, and lay in the cool dirt under the bushes. His mother, busy with stretching Mr. Emmett's weekly pay check (he was a chemist in the town's bottle works) over the seven days, smiled gratefully on his seeming ability to amuse himself. She misunderstood entirely the moods that sent him crawling under beds and into airless closets. There were times, however, when Gifford's eyes, looking intently at her, startled her and made her wonder if anything was wrong with him. It appeared to her then that the child Gifford looked at her with a most curious and desperate concentration, as if he were weaving a spell. Drawing him to her, she would ask kindly at such times what her little man wanted. But Gifford kept his secret.

The lone Emmett to whom Gifford seemed something less than a model child was Edward, the father. When Gifford was a few weeks old, Edward Emmett perceived that his son hated him. Mr. Emmett said nothing about it. He had long ago been elbowed out of any vital existence by his brood and their satellites, and converted into a fluttering, negligible shade of parenthood who continued to drop lamb chops and fried potatoes on the Emmett table from his little perch as a bottle maker. This history had conditioned him to keep his thoughts to himself.

When the curious fact that Gifford fell into a fit whenever his father approached him began to be generally noticed, a number of theories sprang up as to its cause. Mr. Emmett defended himself vigorously against charges of clumsiness and unfriendliness. But Mrs. Emmett had still another theory that left him silent. His wife was of the opinion that the little creature objected to the smell of chemicals always rising from

Mr. Emmett's person. And her husband recalled that Lily, as a bride, had once burst into tears over some chlorine gas lingering in his mustache, and concluded that Gifford had inherited from his mother this unreasonable distaste for antiseptic odors. Mr. Emmett took to bathing and cologning himself like a stage beauty, but, sweetened though he was, his effect on his son remained unchanged. The otherwise placid infant continued to have convulsions at the sight of him.

Such, without going any further into the matter, was Professor Emmett's childhood. Ignored by his brothers and sisters, misunderstood by his mother, and mysteriously outraged by the male collaborator of his being, Gifford tottered about at the age of three like a little ghost whom every dawn threatened to dissipate. At four he took to running away from home and hiding beneath neighborhood verandas, from under which he was dragged weeping at the frustration of his plans. At five he became a moody survivor of a vanished era, for his brothers and sisters and their hallooing intimates were then scattering to work and to college. Gifford haunted the once gay household like a little beggar poking around in the wake of a carnival. In the summertime, shooed out of the house to get some air, he spent long hours under the currant bushes, inert and moody.

It was in this retreat that Gifford, at six, discovered surprisingly a world that fascinated him. This was the world of insects. His child eyes became aware of ants and spiders, wasps, butterflies, grasshoppers, and earthworms. Lying on his stomach, chin cupped in his hands, Gifford would remain absorbed for hours by the busy ways of this wonderfully unhuman population. He began to see in the seemingly aimless careenings of these, his first friends, certain patterns of conduct. These minute creatures, in whose midst he sprawled like a Gulliver, became significant and interesting to him as human beings had never been, and he watched them as if they were tiny letters spelling out a new and breathless tale.

Through long summer hours he would lie this way, and sometimes, lured by these Pied Pipers of the garden, he fol-

lowed them to sit like a guest on the thresholds of their curious homes. He learned many things. He became aware of the mother love of the beetle, of the precision and cruelty of the spider, and of the marauderies of the wasps. He grew to know the little wind lanterns of the glow-worm. The large head of the grasshopper, like that of a tissue-paper horse, became as familiar to him as if it spoke. The beetle, senile and saucer-eyed, and the paunchy spider, with its crown of legs, waiting owlshly in its hazy net, were his comrades. None of these diminutive ogres frightened him. Their ominous caricature of human limb and feature pleased him like a set of strange toys. He never tired of watching this little universe crawl and fly and dart, weave its homes and struggle murderously for its food.

Unguided by books, he created for himself a childish version of all he saw. The dark leafy tunnels of the overhanging currant bushes became a fairyland where eccentric-looking heroes performed for him. Dragons and helmeted knights battled on their twig arenas. Hobgoblins hung by invisible threads. Miniature witches leaped through the air, and the eyes of genii gleamed out of tiny holes in the ground. Troubadours, transported by summer, played their violins, and little scarecrow kings teetered on the berry clusters. The ants seemed to him like beaded acrobats of the grass blades. And over the bushes the darning needles fired arrows at the sun, and the butterflies swayed like tiny flags.

Like his friends, Gifford prepared himself for the winter months. He erected an insect zoo in his room. Glass jars containing ants and spiders, wasps, beetles, and flies, crowded his bureau top and his window sills. When the cold days came, Gifford tended his charges anxiously. He fed them and invented diversions for their welfare. He constructed exercise yards for them out of shoe boxes and built rickety mansions of mosquito netting. For the ants he modeled special hills of dirt so that they might not grow homesick.

It seemed unnatural to Mrs. Emmett that anyone should be interested exclusively in bugs. But her efforts to lure the child

away were unavailing. It was the despised Mr. Emmett, whom Gifford still hated, but in an inactive fashion now, who rescued his son from the shadows of ignorance that seemed to be permanently enclosing him. Mr. Emmett understood that Gifford was a scientist. He was proud to have handed on to his son his own interest in this profound side of life. Diffidently, Mr. Emmett sat with his son and imparted to him his own theory of education.

"If you will go to Bible class and pay attention to your teacher in school," he said, "you will be allowed to study what you like when you grow up. I can't explain why it is, but you must study about angels and presidents before you can study about bugs. But I can promise you that after you've gone to school a long time, you'll be able to return to insects, and nobody will bother you."

Lured by the promise of this reward, Gifford submitted himself to the educational system. And long after Mr. Emmett's death, the prophecy he had made came true. At thirty-four, Gifford Emmett was raised to a full professorship in the university he had entered as a gloomy, gangling youth. Jars filled with insects, and elaborate cages teeming with his beloved coleoptera and arachnids, crowded his bachelor apartment just as they had his childhood bedroom. And for several hours a week, as Professor of Entomology, he lectured happily on the secrets of that Kingdom of the Little which he had first discovered under the currant bushes.

In leaping thus from the seven-year-old Gifford to the tall, thin, dark-haired, and goggle-eyed savant of thirty-four, I have omitted little of his life that calls for chronicling. During these missing decades Gifford was engaged chiefly in the moody but ungraphic business of receding from the world. He continued to hold himself like a bystander on the outskirts of its charms, its follies, and its adventures. He read tirelessly and studied deeply, and his mind evolved within the egg of inaction. It was a curious mind full of wit and learning. But it revealed itself to no one.

He had matured without tasting anything of life. Now he

thrived like some specimen in a bottle, detached from his species and forgetful of them. Only one thing occasionally disturbed him. This was a periodic lapse into melancholia. The desire to die seized him each year of his life, and stretched him weeping and inanimate in his bed. These melancholic fits lasted usually through the week of his birthday. He suffered then from a sense of suffocation. The chill and contemptuous wit of his mind turned to fog. He lay staring at unbearable walls and listening to sounds of a life that tortured him. However, he always recovered quickly, and resumed his reading and his friendless ways of living as if nothing had interrupted them.

There are some of us, many more than are usually counted, who do not grow up at all. Life is unable to alter these little ones among us despite the plant-like increase of their bodies. In them the child persists not as a dim imprisoned ghost, but as a face always visible. All the trappings of age, its wrinkles, its wisdom, and its very largeness, seem like misfit clothes in which these children must stagger grotesquely about. And no matter what their lives or passions may be, there remains stamped on their reluctant adulthood the bewitched and pathetic contour of innocence.

Professor Emmett was of these nursery lingerers. His face glowed as if it were a shell that had never known wind or sun. So gentle and disarming did the smallest of his gestures seem that there was hardly a female student but felt an impulse to mother him. Men were equally charmed by his staccato wit and childlike simplicity. But Professor Emmett, who, if you looked closely, was still the little Gifford busy with his currant-bush comrades, evaded any intimacies.

In his thirty-fifth year, however, an adventure and a relationship befell him. And with it my tale of Professor Emmett's Homeric adventures in a sense begins.

Myra McKillup entered Gifford Emmett's life at that precise moment when he had decided to quit it. The melancholia that had assailed Gifford since his boyhood had subsided in his thirties. Now as he was approaching thirty-five it returned.

Animation once more left him. Mysterious tears coursed out of his soul and overran his cheeks.

Of the diseases that touch the hearts of others, those of the subconscious are certainly the least. It is difficult to take seriously the nightmares which these oddly afflicted ones seem to parade as pets. We are inclined to regard them as impostors rather than martyrs. The fact that these impostors frequently leap from windows, hurl themselves under trains, thrust their heads into gas ovens, or blow out their brains is not enough to convince us of their reality. Their deaths come too late to impress us with their diseases. Even those who weep at the bier of the neurotic are inclined to withhold their sympathy for the secret agony that sent him to the undertaker's.

Thus, though I have come to a moment in my hero's life that might well call for a little tenderness from any reader, I feel it better to deal unemotionally with the matter. Of objective griefs such as we fancy drive folk to their deaths Gifford had no more than any of the grasshoppers he tended in their bottles. No amorous or professional entanglements beset him. No frustrations sawed at his nerves. Around him lay a little world of flattery, and he had no dreaded tomorrows awaiting him. Yet with all this well-being at his fingertips, Gifford sat ready to die. And if the reader will not cry over the fact he must at least believe it, and not assert that Gifford was behaving absurdly, as wives have been known to remark of husbands just before the latter leaped out of windows.

For a half-hour Professor Emmett sat inert and befogged. He held in his hand a small bottle of chemical which he was about to drink. Outside, it was a lavish spring morning. The windows of his study were open and through them came the shout of early vernal winds, colors, and odors. But this lean, goggle-eyed man remained insensible. Insensible, too, he stayed before another phenomenon. His spiders, hatched on this spring morning, had climbed the towering bamboo stalks provided for them and were escaping through the open windows, afloat on their silken rockets. Unmindful of this long-awaited spectacle, Professor Emmett blankly regarded the

poison in his hand. Like any of his brothers in their bottles, he too sat separated from life by walls that obscured its breath. No tragic thoughts were in his head, and his reason for dying was no more than an oppression that called for death as thirst calls for water.

Occupied thus with the vague gesture which in a moment would bring about his dissolution, Gifford was unaware of a visitor until she had come close to him and removed the open bottle from his mouth. He looked up and saw dimly a dark-haired young woman with large trembling eyes. And at this moment Gifford was overcome with a misunderstanding of Myra McKillup that precipitated his first romance.

He saw her, this sad man pulled back to life, as a creature full of calm, beauty, and goddess-like radiance. A measure of his misunderstanding may be seen in the fact that Miss McKillup was a thin girl, undersized and meatless except for her breasts. These were not large, but, landscaped as they were by famine, they seemed plenty.

Because Gifford's desire to die had been only a temporary one he felt a surge of gratitude for this student who had entered his study by mistake, as she explained. Part of the need he immediately felt for her was probably due to her seeming to his bewitched senses a maternal figure. She had brought him to life, like a secondary mother, and Gifford's long campaign to re-enter his mother's womb transferred itself, a little more practically, to Miss McKillup. He stared at her from that first day with timorous, incestuous eyes, and she seemed to him a human being cast in a tender and superior mold.

This concept too was as completely unrelated to any image of the young woman as his first physical estimate. In addition to being as unmotherly as a hop-toad, Miss McKillup was actually a flibberty nerve-racking creature with a touch of pituitary emaciation. She owned a mind much like a sieve, through which her twenty-five years of life had passed leaving behind a froth of hysteria. She was an unstable and muddle-headed girl. She had a thin, forward-thrusting face like a bird's, bony hands, and a talent for breathlessness. She consid-

ered herself a superior person, for no reason that I can determine. It may be she fancied herself more sensitive than most people, and regarded her inability to talk rationally on any subject as a measure of some kind of mysticism rather than stupidity. She inhabited every cliché like an Archimedes yelling "Eureka." She was a-swoon with economics, art, and a bit of biology. There are whole continents of such women, who seem to feel that they master any subject they take up merely by sighing on it. Attracted by an idea, they belabor it with gasps and tremors as if they were coaxing it into bed with them. Usually, to do them justice, there is some sort of male attached to the idea.

Miss McKillup was of this inarticulate and oracular run of femininity. She was enrolled in a post-graduate journalism course under the not entirely erroneous impression that she belonged on a newspaper—as some kind of critic. Perhaps there was nothing more the matter with her than a need for seeming more intelligent than she was, which so often turns people into fools. Or perhaps she sought to reveal a beauty of soul as a lure for the opposite sex, there being little other bait at her disposal. Unsavory-looking girls often go in for this sort of spiritual cosmetics and flit about with over-rouged ideas and insane-looking mental coiffures.

I intend, however, to run no magnifying glass over Myra. That Gifford should have fallen in love with this lady at first sight and beheld her as a Demeter full blown with the blessings of the earth is a matter between him and his subconscious. My hero, who had never once felt the stirring of libido, was overcome suddenly by a mating instinct as implacable as it was mistaken. This movement of sap in Gifford, however, expressed itself only in a desire to talk. And the professor's many admirers looked on with surprise as their good savant devoted himself to addressing incessantly on the most abstruse of topics a young woman whom they knew to be as rattle-brained as a mongoose.

The curious couple was to be seen haunting all the lonely places that neighbored the university. Pale with long confine-

ment in its bottle, the soul of Professor Emmett emerged and fluttered moth-like before the light it fancied lay in Miss McKillup's eyes. It filled the night with the colors of its wit and wisdom, for it is the habit of long-locked-away lovers to create themselves first before they fall to sighing for another.

It would be cruel to say that Myra understood nothing of what Gifford revealed to her during these trysts. Women usually understand what is said to them in courtship, but their listening has so much more coquetry than scholarship in it that the most Socratic of dialogues turn to valentines under their applause. Yet it is only fair to point out that if Myra listened with other organs than were meant for words to the wisdom of Professor Emmett, the latter was, in a sense, not speaking to her at all. She had accidentally removed the top of the bottle and the professor was emerging genie-fashion.

Gifford began his love-making with an attack on life. His aversion for living had spun many dark ideas in his head. His wooing of Miss McKillup consisted, to the end, of an effort to convince her of the infamy and absurdity of human existence.

For their first tryst, Miss McKillup had guided the professor to a little hilltop overgrown with tall grasses. This was the evening of Gifford's rescue from death. He had clung all day to Miss McKillup, allowing her to cool his head with icy towels and to induce him to eat. Still shaken by the double experience of attempting death and of discovering the first woman he had ever found tolerable, Gifford sat moodily on the hilltop. Now his melancholia thawed into phrase. The shawl of pain lifted from his senses and he spoke coolly and lucidly to his companion.

"I have always hated life," said Gifford, "and have found human existence a sort of calamity."

"You say human existence," said Miss McKillup with the air of a philosopher. "Is there any other?"

Gifford's romance almost collapsed under this insensate question. He looked coldly at the young woman.

"Human existence," he said, "is the least of the phenomena of Nature. The most rudimentary thinker must see us as a

needle in a haystack. The history of the human race from its first grunt to its last sigh will be hardly more than a footnote to the story of life. We are less than a chirp in Bedlam."

"I know," said Miss McKillup sadly, "but don't you think there's some God who is aware of us, or some force?"

"God is aware of us only if He is a microscope," said Gifford, "or unbalanced. Our species will have come and gone too quickly to interest any sane Super-Intelligence."

Miss McKillup sighed and her face became full of compassion for the littleness of man.

"I've often wondered," she said, "what the end of our race would be. Whether the insects would finally vanquish us—or what?"

"The insects are not interested in us," said Gifford irritably. "We are too vague and unimportant in the scheme of things to attract their attention. They bite us purely by accident. As for vanquishing us, nothing could be further from their thoughts. It is rarely that one species vanquishes another. The mind of the earth which we call Nature is so exquisitely balanced a pendulum of creation and destruction that even the most foolish of its children are able to survive."

Miss McKillup looked wistfully at the stars as if she were saying farewell to them.

"It is not the insects who will nibble our species into extinction," announced Gifford. "Our fate is more tragic than that. Man will be one of the few suicides in Evolution."

After a silence during which he continued to stare abstractedly at her knees, Gifford informed Miss McKillup that the dissolution of the human race already cast its shadow into our day. Thought, like a Walpurgis Night, was descending on man and the time was nearing when he would vanish on all the broomsticks of his philosophies. Luckily Miss McKillup was more stirred by his attentions than his assertions, or she might have become sincerely depressed.

Gifford launched into his first courtship essay. The human mind, he said, began very slowly. It took a long time to improve on its first growls. Why it began at all is a mystery. All

we can be sure of is that it was intended as a serviceable bit of plasm. Let us say a sixth sense—a sense of knowing. Nature is full of similar compensating gifts for those of her children unable to run, fly, dig, smell, see, or hear too well. Each of these possesses the gift of some ruse by which it can outwit its enemies sufficiently for survival, like the spider's sting, or the glue arrows of the soldier ant.

Miss McKillup, listening, was surprised to find so much violence in this gentle and child-like man. Nevertheless, it pleased her, for it gave her a duty. She would make this morbid but delightful scholar change his opinions about life, which she was certain he would do under the influence of a little sweetness.

"For a long time," Gifford spoke up again, "the human mind fulfilled its simple destiny. It enabled us to outwit our better-equipped enemies. Primitive man was a very fortunate animal. But we are in no way related to him. We have been whisked out of Nature into the Alice in Wonderland realm of thought. Our mind has hatched a universe. It has projected a world of phantoms on the screen of our senses. We inhabit this world. We crawl on our animal legs into a mirror."

"Please go on," said Miss McKillup throatily.

Gifford remained silent.

After a pause Miss McKillup added wistfully: "I want to hear."

"I think you will understand me better," he resumed, "if I discuss the human mind merely as a parasite."

"Yes," said Miss McKillup breathlessly, "oh, yes. It will be much easier for me. Although everything you say is marvelously clear. Marvelously!"

Gifford nodded and waited for her to find a more comfortable piece of ground. She selected a place near his ankles and, lying down again, this time on her stomach, raised her face eagerly.

"The parasite mind," said Gifford, "is already nibbling at the biologic sanity of the species. Most of modern medicine is the record of the mind's ability to cripple the body. Modern

history also has become a record of mental aberration on a grand scale. Intellectual quibbles now breed our wars. It's not difficult to foresee a world locked in a death struggle over theories for its improvement.

"But," mused Gifford, "I don't think the species will destroy itself in this coming struggle of Tweedledee and Tweedledum."

Miss McKillup sighed like a harp that is being plucked. All the same, the dissolution of the race disturbed her much less than the appearance of a slight flush in the professor's cheeks.

"It's so warm," she said softly. "Wouldn't you rather take your coat off?"

"Thank you," said Gifford mechanically and removed it.

"And your waistcoat," Miss McKillup insisted. This too was removed.

"No," Gifford resumed as she loosened his tie, "it will not be the war of man against man that will bury us in the grave of the dodo bird. Man against himself will be our finish. Not an honorable death, mind you, on the field of battle, but a gruesome suicide in the loneliness of the night, is the fate that awaits us. This suicide has begun. Thought has already crippled our nature. Our efforts to live by our ideas as if they were our bloodstream have rotted away half our health.

"Just look at us today," Gifford cried out to the seemingly fascinated young woman beside him, "us creatures who call ourselves the top of Evolution. Lords of the world, indeed! Why, the humblest beetle might laugh at us if it had time for the study of nonsense."

Gifford paused and stared at the night over the hilltop. How pleasant it was to speak thoughts, even the sullenest! He breathed excitedly. A new and exhilarating argument against life had just occurred to him.

"Our senses," he announced, "are caught in a net of reason. There's hardly a single thing we feel but we must busy ourselves misunderstanding or improving it. All our animal desires must crawl around on the flypaper of our mind and either die there or drag out an enfeebled existence breathing

the poison of our ideals. All the magnificent functions of Nature are becoming confused in us. We can't sleep. Eating gets to be more and more complicated. Sex has become full of hazards and confusions. Morality and poetry have so bewildered the spinal cord that it has forgotten how to signal for a blood supply.

"Yes," cried Gifford triumphantly, "our search for the Ideal has converted our glandular system into a rubbish heap! Unable to transmute us into angels, our minds have turned us into invalids. Our last stand will be in the laboratories—as patients. Our scientists will toil away desperately at extricating our organs from the octopus of the mind. But I'm certain they won't succeed."

After a pause, during which he noticed with some surprise that Miss McKillup's head was now resting in his lap, Gifford continued.

"Have you ever noticed how the spider captures and destroys the powerful locust that leaps accidentally into its net?" he asked.

"No," Miss McKillup said, and sighed.

"The legs of the locust," explained Gifford, "are strong enough to kick the silken snare to shreds. But, as the spider stays out of reach, invisible to the procrastinating locust, it remains busy at work. It envelops the struggling bit of life in a flow of almost invisible thread. Round and round the locust the spider spins its delicate strait-jacket. Finally the locust is unable to move. Then our spider leisurely drains it of its blood, and the locust shell is left hanging in a net to rattle in the wind. We will end in a similar way. Enveloped by thought spun around us, our species will finally wither away to a few last neurotic husks, and then hang motionless in the web."

A little later the two strolled down the hill to the university, Miss McKillup clinging to Gifford's arm. She was pleased with what she called their first heart to heart talk, for she saw that it had made Professor Emmett extremely happy. He smiled when he said good-night to her, and she watched him walk off

with a youthful spring in his long legs, trailing his coat and vest like a workman come home from a picnic.

A number of similar trysts followed, which I might report. But I shall hold myself down to the account of only one more. This took place a week later.

After they had dined together one evening, Miss McKillup—she was known to Professor Emmett as Myra now—guided him to a new rostrum, a little wooded river bank remembered from a previous love affair with a member of the university rowing crew. But Gifford ignored the loveliness of the spot, as he did for the most part the presence of his companion. For he was still too selfish in his pleasure to notice any contributing factors.

Just the same, he spent the first few minutes fidgeting and silent. This was because he suffered as always from the result of too much expectation. It takes time to adjust oneself to the reality of a Miss McKillup when one has walked with Dante's Beatrice all day.

Miss McKillup—Myra—did not allow herself to become discouraged by this ominous beginning. She smiled breathlessly as they sat in the little grotto once sacred to Venus and an oarsman.

"I've been looking forward so all day to this," she said. "I've lost interest in everything else in the world—except listening to you."

Gifford blushed, being unused to such bouquets. He remained silent and listened to the frogs and crickets singing everywhere in the spring night.

"I feel," went on Myra, "I feel as if we had known each other a long time. A terribly long time. I suppose that's because I can't remember ever having had any thoughts except those you've given me."

"The frogs sound very musical, don't they?" said Gifford.

"Divine," said Myra quickly.

"But it's a horrible music to others," Gifford said.

"Others?" cried Myra and looked around in alarm.

"I mean the insects," said Gifford. "Whenever I hear a frog I can almost feel the terror of the coleoptera and arachnids."

"Nature," said Myra, "is cruel, isn't it?"

"No," said Gifford. "That's a most ridiculous misconception. There's no cruelty in Nature. There are only necessity and precision. No animal tortures another animal. The frog devouring the spider acts out of an instinct shared by the spider. It is their stomachs and not their souls that are thrilled by murder."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Myra soothingly.

"Nature," said Gifford, "is a banquet board at which the feasters and the feast are one. This was shown to me once when I watched a praying mantis eat a grasshopper. The grasshopper had caught a caterpillar a moment before. It continued undisturbed to eat this caterpillar while the praying mantis munched on its own legs. Not until the mantis sank its teeth into the grasshopper's digestive organs did the latter abandon its own feast."

"It's all so frightening," Myra shivered.

"To me," said Gifford, "it is merely sane. I find our own species vastly more terrible than the mantis, the spider, and the humble caterpillar. Our mind is supposed to have improved on the manners of Nature. But if you examine our activities you will find that the mind has done little more with our animal criminality than rationalize its crimes. It has added to the simple murder-politic inherent in Nature the genius for depriving the victim not only of his life but of his good repute. There's no monster, in Nature, whose fangs are as cruel as our ideas."

"We are all animals in exile," said Myra with a shiver.

Gifford thought it astonishing that she should not only understand him but share his point of view. He was also surprised that this young woman's head in his lap failed to check the flow of his thought, but somehow increased his desire to communicate his ideas to her. Despite a slight numbness in his thigh, he permitted her to remain pillowed there.

"I'm afraid it's going to rain," said Gifford.

"Oh, no," Myra sighed, "I'm sure it won't."

"There's no question of it," said Gifford firmly. "I've been watching that spider." He pointed to a bush overhead. "She refuses to repair her web. When the spider refuses to reweave her web at night it's always a sign of rain."

"It's amazing," said Myra, who had reached the collaborative stage of female pursuit, "but sometimes when you talk I almost feel that you're not really a member of our species, but an ant or a beetle or something."

Afraid that she had disparaged her admirer, Myra presently amended this.

"I mean with a soul of course."

But Gifford was flattered.

"It's hard to tell what we are," he smiled. "We have only our mind to figure with—and it's difficult to think out any of the mysteries of which we are only so small a part."

Myra had no such difficulty.

"I believe in the transmigration of souls," she said, throwing back her head.

"Fairytale," said Gifford, after a pause, "are likely to contain just as much truth as science. For, whatever Truth is, it seems to express itself as much in fantasies as in facts. Every movement of our mind is inspired by the Truth that exists forever outside it. Who knows but we will yet discover that our myths are the real science and that science is the only myth?"

"Then you do believe in soul transmigration!" Myra cried. "You do! Please don't deny it!"

"I never deny anything," Gifford said patiently. "All thought is the shadow of some truth we cannot understand. And since we can't ever see the Truth, I think it wise to study all the shadows it casts and to discount none of them."

"How wonderful that we should both believe in soul transmigration!" Myra chanted.

This was too much for Gifford.

"I don't know anything about soul transmigration," he said a little angrily. Then he added, more for the sake of politeness:

"However, Nature is so economical, it may be she uses her

forces over and over. Perhaps she does this with the spirit of life, and perhaps this life force continues like a never-broken thread on which she strings the endless little brittle beads of our bodies."

"Oh, to come back to life again as a bird!" cried Myra, carried away by what she felt to be their mutual understanding. "Oh, to fly, to sing, to——"

"It would be terrible for the bird," Gifford interrupted in alarm. "A bird with a human soul in it, even the remains of such a soul, would be a most ridiculous and incompetent fowl. I can't bear to think of anything in Nature so handicapped."

The rain came. A mist and an odor trickled into the little clearing. The roof of leaves resounded with the rain clamor.

Gifford was silent. It occurred to Myra that he was a very strange man. She sat up and looked at him. He was sitting, ears cocked to the wild hum of the rain. She watched his dark unflickering eyes and wondered what they were seeking in the night. He seemed to have fallen into a trance. She touched his hand to waken him, but his curious expression remained unchanged. The round black eyes protruded, empty and sage-like. The thin lips were curled inward over the teeth. The entire face glistened with so mad a preoccupation that Myra shivered. Gifford's face seemed for an instant like something brittle rising out of the grass and regarding the night with an ominous and secret understanding.

"What are you thinking?" Myra asked softly.

"Nothing," Gifford answered. "I wasn't thinking."

Myra drew nearer to his side.

"How foolish people seem in the rain," said Gifford suddenly, "as if rain were no longer meant for them. They've left the breast of Nature."

"Is there no way back for us?" asked Myra. "I mean, for those who understand?"

"No," said Gifford, "we're on our way somewhere else."

After its first gusts, the rain dwindled. Myra decided that the climax of their tryst had been passed.

They walked back arm in arm to the university. On this

night Gifford was too preoccupied to smile when he left her.

After Myra McKillup had listened to Professor Emmett for a month she put an end to his talk by marrying him. There is no need to go into the tender and unscrupulous progressions at the end of which our hero found himself before the altar. He was a little amazed and considerably bewildered. After having been blessed by the minister and kissed by the bride, Gifford suddenly asserted himself. He refused to go on a honeymoon.

He announced, a little tardily, that he had been looking forward to these three summer months as a perfect time to investigate the stomach of the termite. He was determined, Gifford firmly told his bride on their way home, to solve the riddle of the parasites that inhabited this wood-devouring insect's stomach. It was these parasites that provided the termite, to Gifford's never-ending amazement, with a digestive apparatus omitted by Nature in its construction.

Seated in his apartment, now newly curtained and groomed out of recognition, Gifford did his best to explain the intricacies of the problem to his bride. And technical though this problem was, I feel its details are entitled to the precedence given them by the bridegroom. His investigations into the termite's digestive phenomena, started on the day of his marriage, were to mean more to him than the pathetic relationship into which he had been whisked. They were to outlast this union and even himself, and they were—in these pages at least—to place his name on the small scroll of heroes. I shall therefore join Gifford Emmett in elbowing aside his marital duties in favor of the colony of termites to which he hurried right after the wedding ceremony.

Gifford's interest in the parasites that served the termite in the place of digestive organs antedated by many years his wooing of Myra McKillup. He had, as he explained soothingly to Myra, often watched these microscopic mills at work. The parasites and not the insect converted into a nutritive pulp the otherwise fatal wood cellulose it consumed. It was indeed odd that the termite, considered by scientists the most essential

mouth in Nature, should be lacking in its own digestive equipment. For it was the termite whose unique and diminutive jaws were the pestles that ground death into life. They transmuted the cadavers of trees into that womb of nitrate which is earth. Without this spectacular work done by the termites, as Gifford had often informed his students, the world would have hardened into a vitrified and unproductive crust long ago. The mundane detail that in their heroic task as earth-makers the termites also nibbled away a few wooden houses seemed to Gifford hardly worthy of consideration. The termites were of vastly more importance to the world than the handful of people they inconvenienced. Yet for this vast and scientific task, Nature had devised an incomplete tool. The stomach of the termite was incapable of the miracle assigned it. Its labor was contracted out to parasites.

Concerning this, Gifford had a theory which he admitted (to his petulant bride) was more romantic than scientific. He sometimes thought that the very importance of the task had inspired Nature to divide its execution so mysteriously. Thus, if something disastrous happened to the termites as a species, the parasites, much more invulnerable, would survive to seek out another ally within which to carry on the great work.

But the greatest riddle to him (Gifford also confided to Myra) was that of the parasite's genesis in the insect's stomach. For the termite was born innocent of them. They showed up later, a work-crew arriving as if by magic to take up the business of converting the earth's dead wood into life-giving soil. On the death of the termite they departed. Gifford was determined to uncover the secret of the parasites' arrival.

Two theories attracted him. Either the newly born termites acquired their work-crew from the excrement of their older fellows, on which they fed and which served as a transport service for the parasites; or the termites were part of a double birth phenomenon truly unique in Nature. It was possible that they were born with parasite eggs already in their useless stomachs and that these eggs contained their supplementary selves.

Myra was left during the long days of her honeymoon to contemplate these matters and a few others even more disturbing. But for Gifford his parasite hunt was the happier side of marriage. He secured the help of Professor Gerald Canning, an accomplished biological chemist, with whom he spent the greater part of his honeymoon.

But Gifford's home life can no longer be ignored. Even Gifford was becoming aware of certain challenging factors in it. The first and most disturbing of these was that in marrying the provocative Miss McKillup he had suddenly found himself locked away with a companion to whom he was totally unable to talk.

The explanation for this evaded our confused bridegroom. Like so many men Gifford had been lured into wedlock not by a woman but by a superior version of himself risen genie-fashion out of his bottled existence. It was, in a sense, himself he had married. He had taken a witty and exuberant Professor Emmett to the altar, and apparently left him there.

This hidden and evanescent self, which the most unlikely of women are able to evoke in us, is one of the chief causes of marital disaster. Its disappearance at the first breakfast table gives the groom the uneasy impression that he is bewitched. The phenomenon occurs most often to unsexual men in whom the mating instinct gives birth to personality rather than desire. Enchanted by their vivified personalities, these bridegrooms collapse like a jack-in-the-box at the first conjugal caress. The superiority born during their courtship is almost instantly deflated in the marriage bed. The former lover full of dreams and rhetoric vanishes like an imposter. There is left an inferior and useless husband.

The issue, at the beginning, was not of Gifford's making. Although cast down by his lack as a husband, Gifford was inclined to regard the matter in its perspective. It had no bearing on his labors of dissecting the termite stomach, which he considered his real lifework. The absence of any sensual interest in Miss McKillup came as no surprise to him. Neither she nor any other woman had stirred even so much as curiosity in his

head. He would have been as much astounded at any evidence of passion in himself as if he had grown horns. Accordingly he had weathered the first nights with more distaste than panic and hurried off to his termite colony with the childish hope that his incompetence would soon turn his bride's attention to other matters.

Although innocent, he had brought to his nuptial couch a curious sex lore gained from watching through a magnifying glass the libidinous moments in the lives of his spiders, beetles, and ants. His shyness before the swooning Myra was a little complicated by these memories of cohabitations studied since his boyhood. The hundred fierce little dramas of insect amour, whose details he had fully recorded in notebooks, bewildered him on his own bridal night as much as the memories of any rake. There was one scene in particular that kept recurring to him during his first days as a groom. It was the mating of a praying mantis observed seven times enlarged under his glass.

He had come upon the affaire mantis just as the female, lean and spectral, had permitted the woefully lesser male on her back. He had watched the tall and dreadful bride turn her serpent head and begin slowly munching on the passionately employed lover. The Romeo's head, wings, legs, and torso had disappeared under the razor-edged jaws of his mate. Yet this headless, legless, armless, but still enfevered swain had continued at his devotions. There had remained of him finally little more than a sexual organ. This, still alert and full of lubricity, had concluded by itself the act of love.

Gifford's imagination fastened on this spectacle the moment Myra emerged from her dressing-room in a creamy, green-dappled negligee with flaring sleeves, and held out her arms to him. The costume had instantly reminded Gifford of the hieratic and macabre wings of the mantis used by that ogress to bewitch her prey. He had said nothing of this to Myra. He felt during the following days, however, that he would be unable to embrace her as his wife as long as she reminded him, by coloration and gesture, of that cannibal insect.

On the fifth day of his marriage Gifford stopped on his way

home from Professor Canning's laboratory to buy Myra a blue unpatterned negligee with tight sleeves. Myra, whose sex lore had not been acquired through a magnifying glass, accepted the gift without understanding. She kissed her husband gratefully, but appeared that night in the creamy, green-dappled, mandarin-sleeved transparency which she believed to be extremely seductive. Gifford shuddered, broke into a cold sweat, and clung fearfully to his own bed. After some minor caresses Myra retired to her pillows. She lay for a long time considering the various courses open to her in this combat with Gifford's virginity.

The ex-Miss McKillup was a young woman lacking in malice or any of the villainies of temperament that wives so often bring as their sole doweries to marriage. She was neither possessive nor given to that home-wrecking preoccupation with her mirror which vainer faces, or prettier ones, adopt as a career. Her heart was kind, and her delusions of being a superior woman were for the most part harmless and inarticulate. She felt deeply on the subject of the professor's prestige and future, and was awed, as she should have been, by his talents. And no one could have asked of Gifford's wife a more hopeful scientific prognosis for his single but vital failing.

Yet with all these qualities I am inclined to accept Gifford's first nuptial glimpse of her as a praying mantis. She would devour him a little more subtly than that rapier-bodied, balloon-winged horror of the insect world. But devour him in the end she would. Stupidity is the cannibalism of the female. It is able, no less than razor-edged teeth, to devour men of talent.

Gifford Emmett did not live long enough to be either devoured or uncolored by the commonplaceness of the woman he had married. He underwent, however, some preliminary fading, just as Myra exhibited that first blossoming of a vocabulary enlarged by his phrases which would have resulted in time in that pathetic common denominator that Strindberg has named "the marriage likeness."

Not that there was any hope for Gifford's insufficiency. My poor hero was as lost to the joys of sex as any parthenogenic

worm. His spinal cord was as detached from the signaling female as if it were a-flutter in the wind.

Yet, there is this point—before his marriage Gifford had not suffered from his missing libido. He had been, I admit, the victim of a melancholia that had led him unassisted to the portals of death. But it was a poetical and uncrystallized melancholia. Neither a doting wife nor, later, medical science, had stripped him of his toga as a philosopher. Had he died at that time he would have been buried with his soul intact. It was a serpent's trick to give him of the apple to eat and to send him cowering and outcast to his grave.

Gifford's cowering began in the third month of his marriage. Before that time he worked feverishly over his termites. He filled scores of notebooks. He sought to hide his unserviceable masculinity in other industries. But there is no concealment for a man who has found a part of himself ridiculous. The canker will eat away his conquests, and his one little useless organ, like a worm, will devour his greatness. Finding himself night after night stretched beside a woman, and always as futile and absurd as if he were a bit of rotten cork, Gifford began to lose his character. The mornings found him more and more morose. He arrived at the laboratory with a clouded eye. Week by week the talents he had developed came to seem less than those he had been born without.

His impotence finally spread to the ants. He was as unable to deal satisfactorily with the termites as with Myra. Soon he was no longer able to eat properly. A tremor made his delicate research work impossible. Sleep withheld itself. Nightmares rode his bed. He grew gaunt and a little stooped. A harried look gleamed from his eyes. His desire to become a male, and his increasing psychic efforts toward that end, had been received apparently as a declaration of war by his well-armed subconscious. A conflict had started in Gifford, and his organs became a befogged battle ground. He sat around twitching and bedeviled with the echoes of this hidden warfare.

In the fourth month Myra insisted that he consult a psychoanalyst. It was only fair to both of them, Myra argued, that he

turn to science, since love had failed. Gifford resisted. His soul rebelled against this picture of itself being stripped like an onion in an analyst's office. His wisdom shuddered before the thought of being treated as if it were the layers of a disease. How foolish it seemed to him then to reduce the jewels of the mind and all its talents to the symptomatology of inert glands, to make of himself an enemy and harry himself like a traitor. But, as Myra pointed out, he *was* his enemy. His mind, brilliant though it was, must be regarded as the foe of Nature. And Gifford hung his head as his theories came home to roost. He saw himself as among the pioneers of disintegration. He was tasting the future of the species which must end, as he had prophesied, in the laboratory as patients. And so Gifford Emmett and all his wisdom and talents went to the doctor.

Dr. Oliver Jerome, the soul searcher into whose office Gifford was piloted by Myra, was an extremely talented man with an instinct for spiritual anatomy that soon won his patients. Gifford was immediately attracted by this new lens under which he was placed. His own keenness grasped quickly the manner of its operation. And instead of the repugnance he had anticipated, he felt himself being drawn into that friendship for the dark-eyed, placid-faced Dr. Jerome which is the first step of the "cure."

The human being has a remarkable and tireless gift for loving himself, or at least for being fascinated by himself, and he will fasten his gratitude on anyone who assists him in this direction. Within a week Gifford felt deeply attached to his ally—the analyst. The quiet-spoken, unemotional questioner seemed to him both guide and matchmaker. The analyst's eye that looked on human sins as if they were blood cells removed Gifford's social sensitiveness. He was able to experience the thrill of encountering the unknown in himself without embarrassment. He became oddly pleased to discover that his soul was as full of intrigue as a nest of spies and that the Gifford Emmett he had known was a sort of Character-President who had achieved office through the political chicanery of his subconscious.

This first uncovering of self is usually a delight to the neurotic. He embraces with elation the new features revealed, and sees in their often horrid and despicable aspect the mystic charm of kinship that our own always has for us. For a time he is actually happy to meet the disheveled Cromwells of his underworld, and he feels himself, giddily, as full of local color as a slum. Later, when this colony of gangsters and perverts on whom he opened a door loses its novelty, his elation is likely to give way to disgust. On his return to his capitol, the patient grows haunted by the chicanery and lawlessness of his own government. And sometimes in his disgust he abdicates.

This, briefly, was the history of Gifford's analysis. During the first days spent with the analyst, he fumbled nervously with his memories. In the second week, Gifford was in full cry after his past. Dr. Jerome, delighted by the eagerness and intelligence of his patient, explained they were trying to discover the origin of his aversion to sex. It was necessary to locate the exact moment in which the patient had decided on the criminal career of impotency.

Gifford offered his theory of the praying mantis, and related excitedly the many points in common which he had detected between that baleful insect and his wife. Dr. Jerome listened patiently to these somewhat lyric comparisons and then informed Gifford that the mantis religiosa was only a ruse to distract him from the deeper, darker truth of his ailment. Guiding him past the mantis, Dr. Jerome led his patient inexorably back to the scene of his crime. This turned out to be the wind-swept room in the Wisconsin home in which Gifford Emmett had been born. On the way back to this room poor Gifford ran the gamut of father-hatred and mother-fixation and a score of other criminal selves. Each day he was whisked along these byways and sent stumbling further into his past, until he arrived before the true and implacable enemy of his life. This was the tiny emerging infant that had, after a fashion, gladdened the Emmett home one snow-bound morning.

Dr. Jerome, aided by Gifford's memory of family tales, discovered that the little visitor had wanted none of this world.

Spanked into existence, the indignant tot had devoted the rest of his life to a kind of suicide. Unable to get back into the womb for whose warmth he yearned, little Gifford had compromised on an aversion to all life outside it. Dr. Jerome was certain that if not for the currant bushes his patient would have willed himself into some form of idiocy. Gifford pathetically agreed that his learning was no more than a ruse by which he had evaded the world of reality. He agreed that his philosophy of hatred of humanity was the flowering of his original aversion to the doctor's forceps. As for his sexual impotence, Gifford saw that it was part of his fixed decision to remain, as much as was possible under the adverse conditions of maturity, a child in the womb. He was a little confused by Dr. Jerome's added hint that his frigidity toward Myra involved also a fear of committing incest.

In the seventh month of the analysis, Gifford was in full possession of his criminal history. His elation over his unknown selves had long since left him. He had returned to his capitol, and there he sat brooding and helpless. He mastered the conception of himself as an intricate and tireless suicide, and there he halted. He understood that his cure lay in his ability to dispatch his infant nemesis with some mystic *coup de grâce*. But how does one destroy one's oldest self? And with what weapons can one attack that which is deeper than the mind?

Gifford retired into himself and remained there with a futile, moody smile signaling defeat from his lips. His wisdom, silent since the first hour of his marriage, reasserted itself. It considered the quality and strength of his enemy. It measured him by all the science at his command and it came to certain conclusions.

I shall report Gifford's words on this subject because they were the last movement of his human-bound mind. Myra heard them excitedly, for she hoped that the analysis was bearing fruit. She was unaware that Gifford had risen finally from his analyst's couch only to speak his epitaph.

"I should like to believe," said Gifford, sitting with Myra in their lonely home, "that it is possible to re-educate the human

soul. But I doubt whether even Dr. Jerome has been able to convince himself of this. For how can one re-educate the soul when it is obvious that it is impossible to educate it at all in the first place? The womb, alas, is the only university from which we may graduate with honors. The rest of our schooling adds hardly a credit to our standing. For the life particles of which we have been compounded have completed their studies before Nature entrusts us to the world. They have even completed our particular design. Our glands contain the full album of our photographs. The amount of our hair, its situation and duration; our height, weight, and coloring; our capacities for love and hate and even the nature of those who are to stir our emotions—all these are written in our embryos. The strength of our muscles and length of our bones, the very bent of our talents—whether we shall sing or be mute, whether we shall think brilliantly or dully or not at all; our politics and hobbies, in fact, are assigned us in the womb. Our thousand moods as well as many of our physical mannerisms are all predetermined for us by the quality of our thyroid, pituitary, adrenal, pineal, and other bits of tissue. We can move only in the directions charted for us in these glands. The distances we may cover are also fixed. We are, in the main, as predetermined as the insects—but less perfectly so. For there is left for us a small margin of chance and an even smaller one of effort. Within this little margin we are permitted to rattle around like peas in a pod. It is this pathetic movement we call our individualism, free will, divine independence, and so on.

“Seeing ourselves complete this way when we are born, with our destiny inscribed in every gland, I can’t understand Dr. Jerome’s theory that we are capable of rewriting our fate—that is, if he has such a theory.

“I am afraid,” said Gifford, “that my cure lies in a more practical rebirth than our psychiatrist has to offer.”

A look of torment came into his eyes and he muttered almost inaudibly: “It’s not pleasant to be a human being.”

Myra squeezed his hand tenderly, but Gifford continued to look fixedly at his shoes.

"Dr. Jerome's science is not impressive," he said at length. "But for that matter no science is very impressive. If you look back on what the Mind has thought since its first known statement, there's only one thing worth noting. This is the fact that its thinking invariably turns out to have been comic. Today's truth becomes tomorrow's jest. The Mind is always a hero to its own generation and usually a clown to the following. It is well to remember that we are in the midst of a constant yesterday of folly.

"The tale of who and what we are," Gifford said sadly, "is the tale told by a Peeping Tom flitting from one keyhole to another. Our knowledge is full of scandal and rumor, but none of it has seen the face of life or looked even for an instant into its eyes."

Gifford finished and stood up. He smiled for a moment on the alien woman whom he had married, and then went to his room. In the morning Gifford Emmett was found dead. Beside him was the bottle which Myra had taken a year before from his lips. It was empty. Myra, who had come into the room to waken Gifford, stood looking at his body with more amazement than grief. It was curled up, the knees clutched against the chin, and the head tucked down in a sightless and yet pleasant-seeming sleep.

Now that we know that the spirit of the tree returns to the earth, to be born again as loam, mushroom, or forget-me-not; now that we have discovered that when sea-water dies, algae appear to breathe back to it those very chemicals that had fled its dead and mighty cheek; now that we have mastered, however vaguely, the fact that all matter is a transitory display of eternal energy, and that there is no destruction but only renewal, it will be an aborigine of a reader, indeed, who sneers with incredulity at the bewildering fate that turned Gifford Emmett into an ant.

I say bewildering because, despite the assurances of science,

there are some things I don't understand about it. I understand fully that the human spirit is chemically related to the sap of the vegetable and the whinny of the Unicorn and shares their fate. All that lives must ride and bob along on the same curving but unbroken seminal river. The headwaters of this eternal stream are unknown, and the Sea of Death into which it empties is another vast and unknown place. We know only the little landscape between that we call Nature. Having completed our brief excursion on this bright river, we very likely become part of some piece of legerdemain such as the sun performs on the sea. We, too, are probably lifted out of the Sea of Death and precipitated again into the hidden headwaters. And I can understand fully that this evaporation must be a fine democratic sight—that a man, a crocodile, and a gnat all evaporate, as it were, together into one great mystic cloud. And out of this far-away womb we come tumbling out again in an anonymous and intermingled cloudburst, hailstorm, or drizzle. We are returned to life as capriciously as weather. And out of this reservoir of vibrations or, at best, a sort of laboratory mist, we must not expect to emerge in the guise we entered. This would indeed be preposterous. We are re-costumed for our new excursions out of a most chaotic wardrobe. And it is our fate that any cap fits, whether it be a rooster's comb or a bishop's miter.

Of these matters I am fully cognizant and I can thus understand Gifford's reappearance as an ant. I could, if I wished to devote more space to the problem, explain it in considerable detail. But still one phase of it bewilders me. This bewilderment does not lie in the fact that Gifford became an ant but that he remained a human being. There I am a little at sea as an explainer.

I can only state categorically that Gifford's soul passed unchanged into the newly laid egg of a termite in the low Sierras to the southwest of the Republic. What the psychic and intellectual points were that made the new-laid termite still Professor Emmett, I shall eschew for the time being. Also, if there is something more mysterious in Gifford's appearance as a California termite than as a Wisconsin infant—in itself a very

mysterious matter if you stop to think of it—it is an increase of mystery on which we had all better turn our backs if we wish to avoid too much confusion.

The egg out of which Gifford emerged was one of some fifty thousand that waited constantly, mob-fashion, for egress from the belly of the termite Queen. It was the habit of this ovarian monster to pump some five to ten thousand of her children daily into the royal bed. Each of these remarkable litters contained, in a ratio deemed proper, supplies of workers, nurses, agriculturalists, soldiers, and lovers. (Since Darwin and all the succeeding biologists have failed to explain the phenomenon of an ant hatching a social system, I shall also ignore the explanation. It is obvious that Nature is not only a scientist but a magician too, and, if she chose, cows would give birth to guinea-hens and Minervas to tree-toads.)

Gifford arrived in the contingent of lovers. He was born a male with the single destiny of cohabitation. All other insect learning would be denied him. He would be unable to forage for food. He would lack all equipment for toiling and fighting. Sex would be his lone talent, his delirious and solitary objective.

In the beginning the Gifford Emmett who lay curled in this tiny egg was scarcely any more related in character than in size to his preceding status. There was no more in this egg than a flickering consciousness of previous human estate.

For many days after he was born the new Gifford lay sightless, tiny, and content to be a grub. His human intelligence was the most delicate of obstructions to the perfect passage of time as the insect knows it. It existed like a bubble against which the great chemical currents of insect life swept and whirled. But, bubble though it was, they failed to dislodge or shatter it. The bubble persisted and within it, as within a secondary body, Gifford's human soul grew stronger.

When he had reached his third instar, having shed his chitinous exterior three times, and acquired the wings that identified him as one of the male reproductives of the kingdom, the human Gifford awoke sufficiently to become aware of his

status and surroundings. But he experienced no shock, for what his mind saw appeared to him only the most fascinating of dreams. And, as one accepts in a dream the strange clothing and abortive geographies of the wandering Personality, Gifford accepted with no sense of panic his dwindled guise and amazing habitat. His dream of being an ant pleased him—though not entirely. He would have preferred in his dream to have been an early paleontologic insect with a wing-spread of two feet, and he made an effort to re-transform himself into such a redoubtable coleopteran. But while he could see himself as an elephantine gnat of some sort, the dream ant remained.

By the time of his fourth instar, Gifford had given up his efforts to alter the time and condition of his dream self. He devoted himself amiably to the study of this little phantom. Yet if it were an escape dream, why had he invented himself as a sexual ant? Here, Gifford thought, was something that would tax the psychiatrist's dream-book lore a bit.

He contemplated other things, among them the lineage of his dream figure. It had descended unchanged from lower Oligocene Tertiary times—as was evidenced by its identical amber-imbedded ancestors still in his college laboratory. It stood to reason, likewise, that the activities of the colony in which he lay maturing had also never changed since that far-away time. The government of which he was now a subject had not found it necessary to pass a new law for a million or more years. It had achieved social perfection when man was still lost in the anarchy-ridden debut of his evolution. This pleased Gifford and he was proud to be a member of a kingdom so hoary and glamorous.

In his sixth instar, curiosity beset Gifford. His dream seemed to him too static. He desired adventures. He was accordingly pleased to notice that his termite self was moving about. But even as he nodded with approval (an inward nod which the nonvertebrate termite in no way shared) he became aware of dangers now besetting this sightless and winged dream self. He recalled with a touch of fright that the status of the alate

in the termite colony was a most precarious one. For this alate, who alone of all the castes in the kingdom was designed for love, inspired revulsion and rage wherever he appeared. Unequipped for foraging for food himself, he was ignored by the busy workers, who seemed intent on providing food for all mouths but his own. In fact these toilers seemed full of contempt for him and for all his sexual brothers, who lay about dreaming of their coming hour of love in the spring. And the soldiers too exhibited toward him the warrior's distaste for the sybarite. They were constantly decapitating and dismembering the defenseless, half-starved Romeos of his caste, tearing off their wings in what seemed to Gifford nothing more than the sadism of morality.

Wisely, Gifford accepted the fate of his kind in the kingdom, a sort of leper's fate. He must hide away from every one of his fellows, steal his food at the risk of his life, tremble before every clanking troop of warriors that passed, and lead a be-deviled existence that was truly heartbreaking—all this because for one hour in spring he was to enjoy the pleasures of love. It would seem that the State, jealous of its metronomic soul, resented even that exercise of individualism which insured its continuance.

Undeterred by the dangers that beset him, Gifford continued to study the swarming life around him. He saw the workers toiling at their thousand tasks, keeping the ventilator corridors in repair, hurrying down the spiral roads with food for the combination store- and furnace-rooms. He could feel the warmth rising from the decomposing provisions and calculated quickly that winter lay outside.

In addition to the multiple domestic tasks of feeding, cleaning, airing, heating, storing, nursing, and all that occupied the kingdom, there was the constant work of battle. Troops of soldiers were continually a-rush to the outer gates of the kingdom, for here the enemy everlastingly threatened. The black and red ants, scenting the stores of foodstuffs and hungering for the soft bellies of the termites, were forever hurling themselves into the kingdom and advancing down the ventilator roads.

Gifford watched a number of battles. He saw the warrior ants march in formation to meet the enemy, and take their stand like a praetorian guard barring the way of conquest. These armored bullies, whom Gifford had come to hate because of their wanton and vicious manner toward his own daydreaming caste, now became heroes whom even the alates must admire.

He had watched angrily these idling guardsmen standing about so overarmored that they were unable to feed themselves. A sycophantic worker class not only brought them viands but stuffed them in their mouths while these robots stood glowering like visored knights with iron-gloved hands clutching halberds that could never be laid down. But when the tocsin sounded in the termite land, and the alarm of the enemy at the gates was spread through the kingdom by the soldiers, and the corridors echoed with the beating of warrior helmets against enameled walls, Gifford, flattened against a ceiling, would see a rally and a march forward that were unforgettable.

The several battles Gifford witnessed were beyond anything he knew in the history of human heroism. He learned now that the courage of the termite warriors actually modeled their figures from birth, for they wore no armor on their backs. Since they would never turn tail to the enemy, no wasteful protection covered their rears, which were as vulnerable as the bellies of moths.

Gifford watched and admired these constant Thermopylaes. He grew to feel a regard for the clanking militarists in whom burned this great mood of valor and sacrifice which seemed to him a little nobler than his own dream of a spring cohabitation.

And still the half-delusion that these were all fantasies parading in his human sleep held Gifford's mind calm. The delusion remained until his seventh instar. On that day, full grown and finally winged, Gifford tasted for the first time the whole horror of finding himself an ant. His awakening occurred in the following manner. Moving furtively along the deep corridors, he had made his way through encampments of warriors and caravans of workers toward the place he knew

existed somewhere in the kingdom and which he had not sufficiently observed in his first metamorphosis. This was the royal chamber of the Queen, where he discovered himself standing presently.

At first his human mind was fascinated by what he saw. But as he stood watching the hailstorm of termite life heroically brought forth in her bed, realization smote him. He became wildly aware that he was not dreaming this sight, that he lay in no bed of his own, hatching fantasies out of his subconscious. This tiny deviled termite standing on the Queen's threshold was himself. These pin-point features, this drop of matter was Gifford Emmett. His human mind was attached like some incredible fungus to an insect. It existed within its tiny structure. It was he, Gifford, who was the dream. And it was the ant who was reality.

With this knowledge, horror streamed through Gifford's mind. Despair erased for a time all his thought. His soul sought to hurl itself out of this minute and suffocating world in which it was trapped. But the insect in which it had its spurious seat clung to it with the clutch of doom. He sought to cry out and like some insect Samson to wreck the pillars of his prison and bring the kingdom crashing down on him and all its subjects. But no sound came from him and, though his mind vaulted, his midge of a body remained motionless. And he realized that he had no powers of expression other than those of an alate. His soul, complete with all its human senses, was not only without face but without talent of utterance.

Recovering slowly from this shock, Gifford found himself clinging to the wall of the great royal gallery and, philosopher that he was, he presently concluded that his condition and new environment were of minor importance.

There were many dead thinkers, mused Gifford, shaken but heroic, who occupied an even smaller space in the world than he did at this moment. And what, he argued, was the human body compared to the operation of reason but a cloud to the sun?

From this it will be seen that Gifford's former notions about

the horror of Thought underwent a most thoughtless change no sooner than he had discovered that it was his only human possession. He clung to reason now like a survivor to a wrecked homeland. Despite his former infatuation for bugs of all kinds he refused to consider himself one, now that so ideal an opportunity offered. It was no doubt odd that Gifford, having become one of Nature's superior children this way, should cast his lot so loyally with a species he had always derided. But we are, perhaps, none of us ever ready to be what we dream.

His mind careening in the rapids of these revelations, Gifford opened his eyes again to the monster mother on her couch. Monster was a poor word, he mused, shuddering at what he saw. The termite Queen was no new sight to him, but it was one thing to have studied her as a scientist and another to look on her as one's progenitor. This new view held Gifford spellbound and nauseated. Two thousand times bulkier than any of her children, for she was six inches long, three inches tall, and as many thick, the Queen lay motionless like the figure of Mother Earth at the core of the world. Her great saucer eyes were sightless. Her legs hung from her as useless as feather fans. She was neither animal nor insect but a fount of life—a God-like ovary that hatched by itself an entire race. For there were no other mothers in her world. Within the great clay ball swarming with myriads of her progeny, she alone gave birth.

In the chamber all about her, several thousand soldiers stood guard. They were picked troops, taller and more unwieldy-looking than those of the corridor encampments. They stood immobile, as the workers fed them. A stream of caterers also attended the Queen. Her gigantic face, gray and bloated and lost in a spermatoc dream, swarmed with subjects bearing food. These kept her mouth constantly filled, stuffing its monster jaws with cellulose pulp, dung, and the mangled bodies of her own children. She munched constantly as she lay. Another stream of attendants presided over her continuous accouchements. As the eggs issued from her in an unbroken larval ribbon, the medical caste hurried them off to the nurseries of the kingdom.

And Gifford, watching the horrid manner of his birth, saw

too the ugly mechanics of his conception. He saw the pallid King, half the size of his consort, come dragging himself like some sack of concupiscence to the royal bed. The movement of this gouty Lothario made him more horrible-seeming than his inert mate. This, like the Queen, was no longer an insect but a mass of seed, an ugly and bloated servant of Nature, servile with lust. His very eyes were distended with sperm. Pale, crippled, and unrecognizable as one of his family, he dragged his volcanic loins toward his immobile bride. Slowly he mounted her and Gifford beheld the disemboweling deed of creation.

The cordon of warriors also looked on. Dwarfed by the occupants of the royal bed, they seemed like homunculi defending a throne. They watched the deed with awe, for it was the holiness of the kingdom, the chant to creation. There was no other sire in the land and no other such deed anywhere. The writhing Monarch astride the Queen was her single lover. From his loins poured the immortality of the colony.

The thought came to Gifford that this ritual before him was his own future. He had been born to breast the thousand hazards of death that lay on the way to the insect throne. If he survived them, he too would become a king. Even now these were the precarious hours of his apprenticeship. And hours even more laden with death awaited him. He would be among the thousands of kingly aspirants who swarmed out of the termite fortress into the world of spring. There in the open, he would seize on a mate. Around the multitude of bedazzled lovers that coupled in the maddening light of life, all Nature would be waiting, ready to devour. Lizards, spiders, black ants, frogs, everything that crawled or leaped or flew, would swoop upon the orgiastic nuptials and dine on them.

But there would be a few who survived. These would drag themselves wingless and exhausted into some burrow to found a new kingdom, to copulate endlessly, to hatch new myriads of workers, lovers, and soldiers, to grow into twin monsters of lubricity. Gifford, watching the bloated Monarch and his insatiable Queen, turned his thought coldly against such a future. His human aversion to sex was multiplied a thousandfold.

He left the royal chamber. Weak with hunger, he crept through a crack into an abandoned room recently the scene of some mighty battle. Around him he saw the disfigured warrior bodies all fallen forward on their faces, and the enemy dead. Gifford paused and feasted.

When it had gorged itself with its first full meal in weeks, Gifford's alate self started forward. It moved slowly, for it was burdened with food. Gifford's mind grew alarmed. He knew the fate that awaited the lethargic insect, and he turned his thought for the first time to the control of the alate's movements. For several minutes Gifford saw that both he and the alate continued to crawl slowly toward the distant corridors filled with clanking soldiers and inimical workers. But as he exerted what he hoped were hypnotic powers, the insect stopped moving. He remained uncertain whether his will had curbed the termite, or some tropism. Nevertheless, a sense of triumph came over him as the insect crept into a niche, where, safe from all dangers, it fell asleep.

At least, he exulted, he, Gifford, would not have to submit to being dragged about willy-nilly by an ant. He could bend it, evidently, to his own desires, even though the process by which he was able to dominate the insect seemed not only mysterious to Gifford but at variance with his learning as an entomologist. But whatever the situation was between himself and his ant self, he would soon determine it, Gifford assured himself. No entomologist had ever been so ideally equipped and situated for research.

Now there were other, more pressing, matters. These were his Thoughts. Like Robinson Crusoe's few possessions salvaged from the shipwreck, they must first be put in order.

He had just learned that he was an ant, and had survived the shock. Now he had to admit he was Gifford.

He eliminated as unimportant any question of the generality of rebirth. The immortality of the human soul was, after all, the most ancient of theories, and, *ipso facto*, he considered it proven.

As for his own rising from the grave as an ant rather than an

angel, this was a more intricate idea. For one thing, it left him at least no closer to the bosom of God than he had been as a university professor. Then, it had not enlarged his wisdom according to the popular theory, but neither had it removed such enlightenment as he had, for which he found himself now wonderfully grateful.

In fact, closing his mind to any disputation for a moment, Gifford for the first time in his two lives repeated slowly and gently the words of a voluntary prayer. He pleaded with the Lord to accept a humble ant and open His arms to its wandering soul. And from this deed he learned the power of prayer as a bulwark against the extremely unusual.

And here the disquieting question offered itself to Professor Emmett in all its darkness and bedevilment. Why, *why*, had he survived as Gifford Emmett? What possible purpose could Nature have had in fashioning an ant man?

The answer was inescapable. Professor Emmett found himself with no choice but to admit that something must have gone amiss with his death and the mechanics of his survival. He was no soul at all pursuing its normal orbit after death. He was a mistake. Owing to some aberration of Nature, he had entered this termite stage as Professor Emmett instead of arriving incognito as the pure spirit of life. Death had obviously blundered and forgotten to strip him of his useless human consciousness. He was at large in the Unknown as an interloper.

And now he faced the prospect of being doomed to exist—as a Professor Emmett forgotten by Nature—through an eternity of anthills and birds' nests and fish hatcheries. He might even find himself meditating amid the electrons of inorganic matter and forced to lie about for aeons as a stone. This thought that he was ordained to travel through the wonders of Nature like some perpetual tourist grew stronger in Gifford. Just as he had been born unfit for his former world, he had been reborn unfit for the Unknown. Gifford asked himself sadly if there was any profound and secret reason for his having been appointed eternal freak. Perhaps there was some pattern in his mismaking, some plot of which he was a mysterious part?

At this point, remarkable doings aroused Gifford from his scientific inquiry. A great commotion filled the kingdom. Gifford entered the senses of his termite self, now astir, the better to understand what was going on. A series of astonishing impressions smote him. Although blind, the alate was capable of a curious kind of sight. It saw reality as an inward dream. No objects existed for it, but it was as full of visions as a saint. Gifford applied himself eagerly to its sensory fibers as to a series of microscopes. Although still unable to translate most of its sensations into human understanding, he knew enough now to realize that the tiny body in which he resided was leaping about in a state of mingled exultation and panic.

A great noise filled the kingdom. From everywhere came the whistle of ants and a ghostly shout of song. The towering corridors were full of rout and revelry. Masses of ants appeared singing and leaping and rolling wantonly over each other. The once orderly roads had become the arenas of a Bacchanal.

Gifford moved forward into the hullabaloo. He saw the alate was no longer in any danger. Its status had changed. Bedeviled since birth, it was suddenly cock-o'-the-walk. And Gifford knew that the festival of Priapus had begun in the dark of the termite kingdom. The dreaded warriors greeted him with whistles of joy. They beat their helmets against the walls, and their cruel halberds had become castanets and tambourines. They had become an orchestra playing for his delight. Above the chant pouring from a million ant throats they sounded their delirious and compelling drum-beats. Gifford stood on his hindmost legs and danced.

Suddenly the whirling spokes of some magical illumination overwhelmed Gifford. The chant around him was drowned by roars of light and sound that lifted him on their reverberations and tossed him headlong. The rush of the lovers out of the bowels of the kingdom to the couch of the sun was on. The exultation of air and light swept away all the memories of that dark termite land, and the alates, wings spread, were flashing toward its gates.

Gifford's mind removed itself from his insect self. He went to work again as a hypnotist. Desperately he exerted his will. He had set his mind implacably against any future that led to the royal bedroom. His human aversion to sex now gripped his insect self with a violence not to be denied. As he neared the little disk of sky at the end of the termite road, he struggled to command the clamorous instincts of his tiny body. Violently his mind proclaimed that he was not destined to couple with any of these million Myras, or to expire, still throbbing with pleasure, on a lizard's tongue.

The moment of exodus arrived. As out of a thousand rifle mouths the alates vaulted into space. Puff after puff of wings burst from the kingdom and remained like madly waving ribbons of smoke. Gifford was among them. He guided his insect self, however, to a leaf-shadowed twig. He knew that there would be neither bride nor enemy in the dark. And from his perch, he witnessed the prenuptial flight of his fellows. He saw that even the soldiers and workers had emerged to watch the spectacle. These stood thronged about the many gates of the kingdom, as the once despised lovers filled the bright spring air with the fiery prelude of their passion. Gifford's insect self trembled, but Gifford held it firmly in the shadow.

Looking at the world above him, he perceived a mass of forms whirling around as if caught in some overwhelming spout of sun and air. And from these insect jets came the bel-low of bulls and the bugles of the chanticleer. The dance in the sun and air continued for a long time. Then, having saluted the mystery of space, the lovers sought out one another. They embraced in mid-air. Gently they exchanged caresses, as yet too overcome by this first taste of pleasure to dream of more. Clinging together, legs and wings locked in a first innocent kiss, the lovers drifted downward, seeking a couch. And Gifford saw that their couch was the frog's toothless mouth and the spider's glue-dipped web.

Blinded to all but their dream of pleasure, the lovers died in droves. Shining-backed bugs leaped at the double morsels. The air and the earth became thick with murderers come to the

carnival. Here and there a pair of lovers escaped for a moment the gulp of the wedding guests. They lay coupled and creating. And when the moment dreamed of through the dark year was done, they threw aside their wings and started off for immortality. But the locust and the cicada came to bar their way. The killer flies swooped into the grass jungles after them. The snails and the earthworms closed the roads.

Gifford watched this scene of bliss and death until the grass grew still and the hum of slaughter was ended. Seemingly all the lovers had been destroyed. But he knew that somewhere the road to immortality had been left open. He thought of the two or three royal couples, attended by the souls of the slain multitude, crawling into the earth to continue the everlasting kingdom of the termites. And his one-time admiration for the nobility and cunning of the insect cosmos fell from Gifford as if only now that he was an ant had he become a man alive with human ego.

A contempt came to him for the manner in which Nature had just now handed on the termite scepter. The few alates who had survived to become Kings and Queens had earned their royalty neither by merit of their own nor by the operation of any law. Caprice alone had planted the crown of survival on them. And though he had always been aware of this lack of individuality in Nature, the fact now seemed outrageous to Gifford's mind.

Gifford recalled that in his human days he had been full of admiration for the Perfect State in which the termites and so many other insect species existed. But viewed now from within, this Perfect State seemed to Gifford a challenging and empty structure. There was, he mused, something revolting about the egomania of Nature, who, like some tireless dictator, demanded a kingdom of sleepwalkers to hymn her glories and never their own.

The perfection of Nature, thought Gifford, is made out of the imperfection of her subjects. The lower the slave the finer the state, was the secret of her ideality. The beautiful government of which he had been a part existed at the expense of a

million individuals who had no existence at all. Their life and death were a command performance. And he thought of his termite brothers as somnambulists trapped in a monotonous dream. All experience was denied them, even that of age. They were permitted to learn nothing, for the wisdom of the tiniest grub and that of the hoariest grandfather were identical. They lived and died under a hypnosis that prevented them from ever changing or bettering the world into which they had been summoned. Their valor, industry, sacrifice, and even love-making were grimaces of obedience, and submission was their only genius.

Those human groups like the Germans, the Italians, and the Japanese, thought Gifford, who seek for strength in the destruction of the individual, are operated by some dark and ancient ideal of Nature's. The lust for mass power is stronger in them than the dream of human development. By depriving the individual of a soul they are able to create an external and hypnotic soul called the State. Neither truth nor justice nor the graces of intellect become then the goal of the individual in it. But an ant-like metronomic existence allures these citizens. Their glory lies in being able to become by the surrender of self something more powerful and glamorous than lay in these scattered and struggling selves. These ego-castraters are the turncoats of evolution and they betray humanity back to its pathetic beginnings.

"I wish," added Gifford sadly, "that I had concerned myself a little more with the politics of the world when I was a human part of it. For I see now that politics is not the history of governments but the broad currents of biology. I was extremely stupid in admiring the spider and the termite above Lucifer and Prometheus."

In the midst of his musings Gifford became aware that he was crawling somewhat uncertainly down the tree in which he had been roosting. He quickly placed his Thought within his alate self and looked on the outdoors for the first time as an insect. What he saw bewildered him. He was plunging through ravines and craters which he recognized, after some hesitation,

as the bark of a tree trunk. Monsters beset his way and, holding his breath, Gifford careened to the ground. Arrived at the foot of the tree, Gifford felt that he had been suddenly translated to the dead and awesome caverns of the moon. Around him loomed shapes of infernal size and strangeness. Monstrous scimitars waved over his head which, with difficulty, he remembered were grass blades. Above the grass, the leaves of bushes floated like vast domes. As from the floor of an abyss, Gifford looked up at a gargoyle world.

Then it resumed its movement. But now it had discovered a road. Gifford realized that it had located the rays of the termite kingdom. He thought, rushing forward now, that here lay the secret of the homing instinct in nature's children. The air was honeycombed with radio-active currents. Placing themselves on these as on invisible rails, the unerring travelers of the sea, land, and air were able to return to their homes and homelands. It was obvious, mused Gifford, that this electric spoor was exuded by every species and that the seemingly trackless wastes of air contained a wonderfully organized system of vibrating streets. But this problem, which would have fascinated him in his human guise, occupied him only a moment in his present travels. He thought instead of the fate that awaited him on re-entering the termite kingdom. The warriors were undoubtedly still hovering about its gates, for it was their custom to assassinate such useless stragglers as returned unwedded from the field of love. Exerting his will, Gifford halted the termite and led it to the top of a vast stone. Here, he reasoned, it would be safe from its subterranean enemies. On this stone, with the warmth no longer in its body, Gifford's alate self submitted to his commands and lay motionless.

When he had rested on this stone for a long time, Gifford heard a sound different from all the noises around him. It was a muffled and continuous note, rhythmic as a purr. As he listened, Gifford grew frightened. This surprised him, for, being ringed everywhere as he was with the faces of death, why should he conceive of a sound coming from somewhere within the earth as unusually terrible? Surely there were no grada-

tions to doom, argued Gifford against the terror-inspiring purr that filled his senses.

"It is not the ant who is frightened, but I," continued Gifford. "It lies with its wings folded like the toga of a Stoic. No hero was ever so calm in the face of disaster or so unperturbed before its many hideous heralds. Surely, I am as good a philosopher as an ant."

Thus, gathering courage from the termite's example, Gifford's mind grew calmer, though the horrible sound continued to come from somewhere in the earth.

"And of what," pursued Gifford, "have I to be frightened? If I am to be slain as an alate, I shall obviously make my reappearance in some other form. And no guise into which I am translated could be so distasteful and unflattering as this oversexed little somnambulist I now inhabit. My efforts to keep this priapic midge alive are absurd and short-sighted. Certainly there must be something more for me in Infinity than a post-graduate course in entomology."

Now entirely calmed by his musings, Gifford settled himself to wait for whatever doom lay in this ominous sound beneath him. But no monster came protruding from the earth or creeping over the edge of the rock. And as the sound continued, Gifford tried to locate and identify it.

An enormous shape suddenly appeared and loomed on the stone. A vulture had alighted beside the professor. He stared at the arrival, pleased to be a morsel too insignificant for its powerful beak. The vulture was evidently resting, for its lidless eyes seemed full of weariness. Then, without warning, something astonishing happened to Professor Emmett's winged rock-mate. Gifford saw its legs disappear into the rock, and a moment later it had vanished entirely. It had fallen into the stone as if into a drum. There was a wild flapping of wings, and after some moments the vulture lifted itself out of this unexpected trap in a billow of dust. Without pausing to examine anything, the bird beat its way off toward the clouds.

Professor Emmett looked bewilderedly at the place where the vulture had stood, asking himself what sort of stone was

this that collapsed under a bird's weight. Moving toward the hole, which was still smoking with dust, he beheld a sight incredible to his human senses. A multitude of termites was in the heart of the rock. Spread symmetrically before him like the spokes of a wheel, the insects were feasting. He watched the wheel turn and the stone disappear slowly before it, vanishing grain by grain into the bellies of the termites. They were eating their way into the rocky core of a mountainside, and Gifford realized that this was the monster at whose purring he had been eavesdropping.

"I have come on a new species of termite," he reasoned, "that is able to penetrate rock as easily as its brothers penetrate wood. It is evident that these rock-eaters have evolved a new race of parasites as their digestive equipment, and that these hardier occupants of their stomachs are able to convert particles of stone into a nutritive pulp. Since nothing is impossible to the chemical genius of the insects, I must accept without further quibble the fact that they have mastered the secret of extracting nitrogen from a completely inorganic form of matter. As Newton said, one must not ask unfair questions of Nature. One must study her secrets not as if they were miracles but as the simple, visible links of a hidden chain."

Pleased to be the first man in the field to view such a phenomenon, Gifford started on a tour of inspection.

"One can't help admiring the little beggars," he mused to himself as he toiled upward from rock to rock, listening always to the purr beneath him. "They know to a fraction the amount of material to remove without collapsing the structure they disembowel. This ability to calculate swiftly and with the most delicate precision the various stresses of a mountainside, the different pressures of its boulders, forests, and rivers, is an instinct containing in it information beyond all the engineering data known to man. Such a talent would be comparable in man to the ability for measuring the weights, distances, and constituents of the stars merely by looking on them with the naked eye."

This was backsliding toward his older attitudes, and Gifford

knew it. And he knew, even in the midst of that vacillation so comically typical of the scholar, that there were greater duties before him than that problematical report to a scientific commission with which his fancy kept toying. What this tremendous adventure was to be, he did not know as yet.

Gifford waited wretchedly. The mountain was quivering all about him. With each thundercrash it seemed to breathe and swell as if it were coming to life. Under the beat of wind and rain its sides shivered like rattled drumtops, and a rumble issued from its heart that drowned the noises of the storm. The din from the earth increased and the pulsing of the mountain grew wilder.

Then Gifford saw the mountain vanish. Bellowing and screaming, the great hill turned to dust. Its boulders exploded, its ravines and gullies opened into great umbrellas of dust. The mountain roared in the darkness. Cavernous night filled the air. Through the darkness Gifford beheld the forests raining out of the sky. Trees were shooting past him. Like a great rocket that had burst in midair, the mountain plunged out in every direction and collapsed in a thousand avalanches. Gifford leaped to a falling bush. Tossed far into the air by winds and gases, the bush parachuted to the earth. It lay on the edge of the smoking shattered mountain base.

Gifford looked out at the disaster. The rain had ceased. A cloud of vultures was drifting toward the mountain corpse. Looking into the great pile of wreckage extending for miles, Gifford saw that all that had lived in this mountain had been destroyed. The fish in its streams, the animals, large and small, who had haunted its forests, and great colonies of birds had all perished. All had been crushed and entombed, all but the voracious little wheels that had devoured the great hill. These still lived. Gifford saw the termite regiments racing undisturbed through the mountain remains, like vandals abandoning a razed and alien house.

Then suddenly Gifford realized the full import of what he had beheld. He had seen a new war lord launch a world conquest. The vision of all the cities of the earth devoured by

termites came to Gifford as he lay staring at the mountain corpse. It was the insects who had conquered the Greeks (despite his argument to Myra), for that valiant race had degenerated through malaria. But how much greater a conquest this would be than all the plagues and epidemics of the past! These termites, whose numbers were already incalculable, would multiply within a year into great moving deserts of destruction. They would spread like a quicksand. As the mountain had fallen, so would all the steel and stone towers, all the homes and factories topple. The structures of the world would become a dust drifting away.

Gifford pondered the vision of civilization ravaged. Man would be stripped of all his inventions. All his refuges, instruments and machines, all his books and his seven-league boots would end in the bellies of the termites, ground to dung by a horde of parasites. The great human house of toys would be devoured and man would be left like an infant, naked and resourceless, on the inhospitable doorstep of Nature.

And Gifford thought of what a tragic little rabble of bad spearmen all the politicians, preachers, industrialists, poets, and philosophers would make. How quickly Nature would close in on this child who had bartered his animal birthright for a fragment of soul.

There would be a battle against the ants, of course, before all this came to pass, for the human species was not without weapons and courage. It would mobilize all the chemicals in the world, and fall upon the termites with poison and fire. But all this would be futile against the overwhelming numbers of termites that Gifford foresaw at their present rate of increase. Also, the chemicals would give out, for the manufacturing plants would be destroyed. And, courageous though man might be, the ant was possessed of a heroism beyond his. Death had no meaning for the ant, for it was only a cell that died. The termites would attack as a single monster, invulnerable and immortal. Villages, farms, and cities would disappear—a scattered rubble heap of a decomposing species.

Here the thought that had been haunting him came into

Gifford's mind like a thunderclap. It occurred to him that he could save the world. He could carry news of the coming conquerors to the scientific outposts of the race, and give man time to prepare for the termite raid. He could, somehow or other, guide an army into this unpopulated land where the conquerors were still hatching. Attacked quickly here in the desert, the termites could be destroyed. The entire mountain range which they now inhabited could be blown up, the surrounding desert irrigated with poisons, and the human race saved.

"I could save the world," Gifford repeated to himself, and lay staring as if under a spell. Then he began irrationally to move. For several minutes he darted about, climbing through the branches of a tree.

"I could save the world," he kept repeating as he climbed the tall tree. Arrived on its uppermost leaf, he hung from its pointed tip and was silent as he looked at the sky.

"I could save the world," he resumed finally. "I can save the entire world of Thought. It is something I must consider. A few hours ago I was full of sentimental memories of the human race. I felt indignant at Nature and her hordes of somnambulistic children. But let me think now of man. Where is his worth? For instance, is there a single thought worth saving? Is there one dream or scheme that has not brought misery to the species? Where in all its history is there an idea that, once launched, has not crippled and tormented it? What have its philosophies and religions been in the end but the means for the creation of new victims? And what is the mind of man, seen as a whole, other than the ghost of his fangs still tearing at the throat of life?"

"Wherefore save this world," Gifford cried to himself, "that has from age to age torn at its brother's face? This mocking, gall-souled race that denies solace to itself, that allows itself to be everlastingly conscripted into the vile armies of unreason, what is there in its soul worth the preserving? Stupid and clamorous race that can be bled of all honor so easily by any mountebank and brought crawling on its belly to cheer at

every crucifixion—it will be well for itself to end. For what is there to rescue,” demanded Gifford, “what is there to man but a little mask, a bit of silly lace that covers the tiger’s eyes, a dainty little glove that hangs tattered from tiger claws?”

“I shall stay here,” pronounced Gifford, “and wait till all the pretense and vileness that has come to be called civilization shall have achieved the honest pattern of termite dung. And from some place astride a grain of sand I shall witness the extinction of the human race with the equanimity that befits an ant.”

Gifford was silent. The matter was ended. Within the body of this termite high up in a tree, the fate of man had been decided. Let the termites multiply and devour man—his soul and his works. Gifford would not move from his leaf.

A little awed by the situation, Gifford decided to put the whole matter out of his mind and devote himself to the business of being an ant. And returning to his termite’s senses, Gifford observed the scene. He noted that the sky and the leaf were of equal size, and that the tree in which he roosted was like a limitless sea whose waves roared and tumbled beyond the rim of the world. Thus occupied with the cosmos of an ant, Gifford suddenly heard a faint voice, a little sound of words that rose from his innermost self. It was his own voice, coming out of a buried self, that spoke. The humanity he had condemned was speaking in him, as if lingering in the court of his mind to whisper against the verdict it had heard.

We have not done so badly, it said, not if you care to look at us a little more closely. Considering everything, we have not done so badly. Before you condemn us, look on us again. Not on our pomp and murder, not on our governments and gibbets, nor racks nor righteousness. But look deeper and beyond these. The list of human evils is long and humanity’s record of honor is small and scattered. But it is worthy of survival.

Gifford listened to the voice of the world he had found intolerable during his residence in it, and a sadness overcame him.

Consider, it went on softly, consider who we are, and the

darkness out of which our mind was born. Consider how ancient the beast is beside the little furrow of thought that has come to mark its brow. Though we have in our ignorance spilled a great deal of blood, we have also wrested a little wisdom out of the dark. In the midst of our lusts and bigotries we have found time to draw maps of the heavens, to examine the roots of plants, to peer through microscopes at our bacterial forefathers, and to pry open a fraction or two the doors of mystery.

And listening to this cajoling voice in him, Gifford beheld slowly another vision of humanity. He looked at its science. Behind the political diseases of its centuries, hidden in the ugly shadows of its religions and conquests, he beheld the isolate mind of man—a never-dying light that gleamed through the ogreish history of the race. How valiantly it twinkled even in the darkest corners, how steadfastly it shone out of the ever-dreadful shadows! No wind had ever blown it out. No tyrant with whip and sword and exile but had left it glowing more brightly.

And Gifford recalled these immemorial heroes of the mind whose names were written on the small scroll of wisdom. Where the many others had butchered and lusted and left behind the gaudy, vanishing tracks of conquest, these few had toiled and died and left only some tiny fact to mark the small road of learning. But how much brighter this little way shone than all the tracks of glory. And how much sweeter was the fame of these everlasting little plodders than that written on the arches of Triumph. Their names were inscribed on bugs and insects, on the skeletons of sea monsters and on the petals of flowers and the sacs, vesicles, and fibers of all physiology. Atoms and gases kept their memory green, and in every chemical and computation their laurels bloomed. They had striven for truth and not for greatness; died in poverty but bequeathed riches. And their honest names, unknown to the changing crowd, had found immortality in a spider's genus or a bit of human tissue.

And how far and tirelessly, Gifford thought, these had jour-

neyed in their quest of truth, dissecting the eyes of butterflies and weighing the flaming bodies of the stars, ever a-tinker with mice and lichens, sea bottoms and cloud tops, and pursuing God or Nature into the invisible and marching on with their mathematical lanterns where there was neither light nor matter to guide them.

These are the mind of man, thought Gifford; these are the law-givers and the rulers of the world. These are the soul of the race. All the rest is a froth of hunger and ego, lust and lies and actors sick with the need of applause. The light of these remains to deny the most abominable darkness. I have judged wrongly. That grim and suffering face of humanity that finds solace in torturing its fellows is not to be judged, for it is only the rudimentary face of man. The list of human evils is long and the record of human honor small and scattered. But it is worthy of survival.

Having come to this conclusion, Gifford trembled on his leaf and began to glow with excitement.

It is possible, he thought, that I am not a freak but a Messiah and that I have been appointed to save the human race from extinction. That is, if there is a God it may well be that I am a Saviour, and that . . . But here Gifford paused and frowned at his own musings.

Such a theory is nonsense, he resumed coldly. It would seem that whoever allies himself too fully on any side, be it even that of reason, becomes forthwith full of the rankest delusions in its behalf. Obviously, if there was a God who had selected me to be His Saviour, He would now invest me with some sort of divine power, or some sense of His existence other than this worrisome quibble at present in my mind. At least He would not rely on an ant to rescue Mankind, if such a rescue was His intention.

Perhaps, added Gifford, I should pray. Whether I am a Saviour or not, it can do no harm.

And Gifford prayed for some metamorphosis which would enable him to speak and enlighten the race as to its impending doom. Trembling within his ant body, he tried to make the

prayer sound as unselfish as he could. He murmured humbly that he was content to be an ant but that his desire to serve God's will made him long for increased measurements and some means, denied to the hymenoptera, of expressing God's word to the human race. Nothing came of his prayers, and Gifford found himself convinced neither one way nor the other by their failure.

The history of God, Gifford remembered, as written by His most infatuated admirers, reveals Him as too busy to give more than a glance at any of His problems. He has never asserted Himself in other than an incalculable way. He smiles out of Infinity like a coquette, and turns His back on anyone smitten by His light. As a result His messiahs usually end up in bonfires, crucifixions, or as mince-meat.

"Whether or not I am part of some divine pattern for the saving of mankind," Gifford smiled, "of all messiahs, false or true, I am surely the most pitiful and futile to look at."

These confusions finally passed from Gifford's mind, and the decision he had made sent him helter-skelter down the tree. During his descent he kept looking about him with his human senses and wondering where he was.

"It is going to be very difficult fulfilling my mission," thought Gifford, "with or without divine assistance. And until I receive some revelation I will approach the career of Saviour as scientifically as I can. This desert around me may be part of Africa, Asia, or America. It is too bad I am such a poor geologist. Professor Wallachek could have told at a glance where he was. My ignorance is unbecoming both to a scientist and to a Messiah. However, I will not waste time bemoaning it. My first problem, wherever I am, is to find some human habitation and then figure out some means of attracting human attention and imparting my Message to human intelligence." And without further debate Gifford started forth.

For forty days and forty nights he continued to dart aimlessly over desert sand and hills. The bewildered but obedient ant plunged about this way and that, and no Saviour of mankind ever turned so many circles as did this termite. During

this time Gifford was tempted often to give up his search and abandon the human race to its doom.

"It would be so much easier to be a Messiah," he mused wearily as he pursued his desperate journeyings, "if there were a God." And he paused time and again to pray, excusing the vagueness of his supplication by thinking: "If my piety is uncertain, it is not nearly so uncertain as God's interest in me. However, I should be a fool if I ignored altogether the possibility that I am a Messiah. In the midst of so many miraculous events as have befallen me, prayer is not entirely out of place.

"It will be easier to persuade Americans to save humanity than it would be to interest other nations in such a project," mused Gifford, "for Americans are about the only people left still amiable enough to be interested in preserving the race rather than in exterminating it."

On the fortieth morning Gifford emerged from the wilderness. He came upon a road. Urging the bedraggled ant to its edge, he surveyed the enormous stretch of concrete. The perfection of this road, the symmetry of its seams and smoothness of its surface, gave him a feeling that he was in his native land. A few minutes later an automobile swept by and he recognized it as American. At least his mission lay in a familiar country.

For several hours Gifford remained thus at the edge of the road, while a half-dozen dust-caked American automobiles appeared and vanished. The sight of the doomed but heedless human beings in them filled him with a sense of compassion. Gone now were all the doubts that had assailed him during his wanderings in the desert. Instead, his mind was full of plans. Foremost was the decision to go to Washington and reveal his news. Since the destruction of the termites would undoubtedly be a Federal project, much time would be saved in bringing the menace to the attention of the White House itself.

Gifford thought hopefully of the Chief Executive, famed for having surrounded himself with men of vision. Surely, he jested to keep his courage up, there would be no difficulty in adding an ant to the Cabinet, particularly in these times of

social experiment. As each car passed, he looked desperately up at it.

"It is too much to expect," he decided presently, "that any of them will stop to give me a lift." And he began to crawl along the road.

Hour after hour he crawled, until, finding himself lying flattened against the hot concrete and no longer moving, Gifford realized that the inevitable had happened. His ant body had collapsed. Gifford remembered its hysterical scramble through the desert with death everlastingly looming and roaring around it, and was not astonished at its exhaustion. The termite, like a toy wound up, had run its course. His will was no longer able to budge the spent creature.

"How pathetic it seems," thought Gifford, "that the fate of the human species should depend on the fragile legs of an ant. For without its body to transport me I am powerless."

Studying his alate self closely, he saw it still breathed. The only thing left to do, he thought, was to signal some passing car. And Gifford's soul took its position on the road's edge and fell to sending out thought waves at each speeding vehicle. Toward nightfall the miracle happened. The despairing ant saw a car come to a halt in front of him. It was a lowly and battered conveyance, snorting as if in the last stages of mechanical existence. Smoke poured from its hood, and its doors were tied shut with pieces of cord. It had broken down, and its driver had alighted and started repairing the engine. There were two elderly women in the back seat. Gifford crawled slowly toward the car, mounted the hot wheels, and deposited himself on one of the four shoes. Here he lay listening eagerly to the conversation of the travelers. He learned that he was in the State of California, route 9, spur 52; and that the mountains some thirty miles to the south were called the Navajo range.

As these were the hills in which the termite hordes were toiling, Gifford memorized the information carefully. Eventually he heard the sound of the motor and the rush of wind and knew his journey of salvation had begun again.

During this journey Gifford changed automobiles a number of times. Hitch-hiking from tourist camp to tourist camp, he remained loyal to his mission.

On the afternoon of the eleventh day Gifford arrived in the city of Washington, which he found full of alarums. Crawling to a newsstand, he learned that the hysterical aspect of the capital was due to five recent attempts on the life of the President, all within the past ten days. The government, as a result, was full of panic, and the press was lucratively occupied with the horrors of the would-be assassinations. Gifford read a more or less cool account of the events in a Republican (anti-administration) newspaper. The criminals, this gazette reported, had all been captured. Four of them were men, and the fifth a scullery maid in the White House. The latter had poured a bottle of arsenic into the President's soup, endangering not only his life but the lives of his entire family. The others had concentrated on shooting and hurling bombs.

Under questioning, the five were revealed to be suffering from what several psychiatrists (Republican) identified as a New Deal psychosis. All five of them considered themselves in the light of saviors. The scullery maid submitted in defense of her action that she had heard on excellent authority that the President intended to close all the churches and banish all the priests, as had been done in Russia. She had acted solely in the interests of the Church, and felt certain that if she were executed for her so-called crime God would receive her with grateful arms as a valiant foe of the present administration.

One of the bomb throwers, a professor of economics at a boys' prep school, had acted out of the delusion that the President had tried several times to break into his study and set fire to it. And on two different occasions he had, in the nick of time, discovered fires lighted by the President in the main dormitory. He regarded his deed not only as one of self-defense but one in defense of many thousands of lives.

"I have nothing more to say," he declared, "except to express my regret that the pyromaniac President is still alive, and, what is worse, at large."

The third would-be murderer, a sergeant of police, appeared to be suffering from a misinterpretation of the finest Republican thought. He had read hundreds of editorials proclaiming that the President was seeking unscrupulously to retain his power by drugging the lower classes. The sergeant had conceived the idea that the nation's Chief Executive was head of a gigantic dope ring and engaged in distributing narcotics to a demoralized Republic. He had accordingly sought to remove him. From his cell this zealot called indignantly on other patriots to rally to the rescue of their country. Otherwise, he announced, the United States was doomed to share the fate of drug-ridden China.

The other two assailants refused to give any reason for their attempts to shoot down the Chief Executive. Informed that they would be tried for high treason, the penalty for which might be death, they answered proudly that Germans knew how to die in defense of their Fatherland.

Gifford digested these matters and all their sidelights from the journals. He realized he had come to Washington at a difficult time, for with all these attempts on his life the President was bound to feel a certain prejudice against any Saviour, however authentic. Just the same, that afternoon Gifford crawled down the policed and deserted street leading to the White House. Undeterred, he scurried up the wide steps and entered the Mansion. The vestibule too was crowded with Secret Service men. Lingered among them, he learned that the President was in his study upstairs preparing his message to Congress. Gifford zigzagged up the steps, located the study door by the presence of four armed guards, and entered through a tiny space over the threshold. A few minutes later, Gifford, from behind a towering inkwell, looked out upon the face of the Chief Executive, who sat in his shirtsleeves. He had a far-away look in his eyes and was chewing on a pencil.

Gifford observed that there were three other figures in the study. Two were obviously guards, for they remained stiffly looking out of the windows. The third was evidently someone very close to the President, for, like his Chief, he also was in

shirtsleeves. After a period of silence, this friend of the President spoke.

"It isn't necessary to finish the message today," he said. "You've got a whole week."

The Chief Executive nodded. He addressed the two guards and Gifford was surprised by his whimsical tones.

"Any more assassins lurking about?" he inquired.

The guards answered solemnly that the coast was clear.

"It's damned hard trying to write with a lot of hecklers around," pursued the President.

"Hecklers!" cried his friend. "That's a fine name for those murderers."

"They didn't murder anybody," said the President amiably. "I guess, along with my other shortcomings, I'm a pretty bad target."

"Listen," said the friend, "I'm dead set against joking on this subject. And, what's more, I'm not going to let you pull any grandstand plays about those assassins. There's going to be no humorous attitude or official clemency. If you let them off easy, it'll just encourage every poisoned mind in the country to take a shot at you."

Gifford watched the President and his friend leave. He had long before decided on his method of communicating his information, but he waited now patiently behind the inkwell. Knowing the literary obsession of the President, Gifford was fearful that he might return for another bout with his Congressional message. Accordingly he allowed hours to pass.

At one o'clock Gifford moved. He crawled quickly up the inkwell. On its edge the ant paused. Gifford urged it on but it remained obdurate. It refused to plunge into the ink. This unexpected mutiny delayed Gifford a half-hour. At the end of that time his will overcame the termite's reluctance and the insect, quivering for a last second on the edge of the inkwell, dropped into its black contents. A moment later Gifford came crawling out of the well. He moved with difficulty, being half choked and blinded with the ink. Down the side of the inkstand he crept and on toward the President's message. Here

Gifford pressed his belly firmly against the paper and began to write. The writing required a score of trips to the inkwell and constant use of his human will. At the end of his labors, however, he had completed the first of a series of carefully contemplated messages to the President. In a wavering thick script, full of erratic deviation caused by the termite's inability to move in a straight line, Gifford had spelled out with his belly the first words of his Message: *Beware the Ants!* The warning covered the entire page of the manuscript.

When it was done the ant sank into a stupor, and Gifford waited for the dawn. He was not worried, for he felt that with practice his ant body would improve as an amanuensis. He felt certain, too, that despite its present exhaustion the ant would survive the hardships of composition.

The President entered his study at eight o'clock in the morning. He greeted the guards amiably and sat down before his desk. Gifford, who had stationed himself under a blotter edge, watched eagerly. He saw the President glance at his manuscript and start to sharpen a pencil and then pause and stare.

"Mr. Sykes," said the President sharply. "Come here, please."

Mr. Sykes came to the desk.

"Who wrote this on my manuscript?" the President asked quietly.

"I don't know." Mr. Sykes frowned. "There's been nobody in this room since you left."

The other guard came to the desk.

"Are you sure of that?" asked the President.

"Absolutely," said both guards.

"If you didn't write this, and there's been nobody in this room since I left . . ." began the Chief Executive, but gave up the logic of his case with a thoughtful "Never mind."

"Thank you, just the same," he added abstractedly.

The incident made a small stir in the White House. The President's friend pointed out that there could be only two explanations: either the guards had dozed off, permitting some

vandal to enter the room and deface the manuscript; or one of them or both of them had done it themselves in a fit of aberration.

"It goes to show," said the friend, "that we can't be too careful. Even the White House is overrun with poisoned minds. I'll have those two guards questioned by a psychiatrist at once."

The President worked until late on his manuscript. When he left, it remained on the desk. But four new figures stayed behind this time to watch the premises. They had been carefully selected from the Secret Service ranks by the friend himself. Their instructions were not to leave their posts at the windows and door for any reason, except to apprehend an intruder.

"Nobody moves," repeated the friend. "We don't want suspicion falling on any of you four. Just keep away from that desk and keep your eyes open."

The following morning there was a greater stir in the White House. For the President had found on sitting down to his desk that his manuscript had been defaced once more. Across its top page was a wavering scrawl as if some infant or idiot had trailed an ink-dipped match over it. The scrawl read: *Termites now eat stone.*

A number of officials were instantly summoned. The four guards were removed to military headquarters. Here they were grilled by the Secret Service head, flanked by two psychiatrists. They persisted, however, in their original statement. None of them had moved from his post and no intruder had entered the study.

This absurd but mysterious sabotaging of the President's manuscript appeared to all concerned as something sinister. It was regarded as the beginning of a sixth plot against the President's life. Investigations were started within the White House. Every inmate and every inch of space were gone over by squads of detectives. After several conferences, the President stated, late in the afternoon, that he had something more important to do than chase a will-o'-the-wisp. He settled down

again to the writing of his Congressional message. It was eight o'clock when he quit his desk. Six men remained behind, among them the Secret Service chief himself. Guards had been placed outside the windows, and at every door of the Mansion. The garden shrubbery was jammed with detectives. The President himself took the further precaution of placing his unfinished manuscript in a desk drawer.

"I don't think," he smiled on the group guarding the room, "that we'll have any more trouble with that scribbler."

The next morning the Chief Executive entered his study at the unusual hour of six. He was accompanied by his friend and an unknown man whom Gifford designated as his Chief of Staff. The guards and their leader greeted the President with smiles, and the latter was pleased to be able to report that there had been no vandalism during the night. The President unlocked the drawer of his desk and removed his manuscript. A frown came over his face as, without comment, he pointed to the ruined top page.

Scrawled in smaller letters that wavered less than those of the previous messages were the startling words: *Civilization in danger. New ants coming. Eat stone. Trillions. If think mankind worth saving hurry up.*

Several hours later the President, his Chief of Staff, his Secret Service head, and various wise men from the Military Intelligence Department were still in conference. A clue had been discovered and the best analytic brains of the nation were wrestling with its significance. Traces of ink had been found in the keyhole of the drawer in which the manuscript had been locked.

The men confronted by the mystery were all agreed on one theory. This was that some mechanism involving perhaps radio-activity and controlled from some point outside the White House had been used. The motive, it was decided, was a plot against the sanity of the President.

"But I am not at all likely to go insane," the President protested. "And besides, most of the Opposition think I am already crazy."

"The Opposition," his friend answered, "has underestimated you for eight years. Let us not underestimate them."

"What's more," said the President, "I am convinced that no mechanism is being used."

Pressed for further opinions, the Chief Executive remained glum for a space.

"I would dislike this to get out," he finally offered with a sigh, "but there is such a thing as Revelation."

The friend was the first to speak in the silence that followed.

"Well," he said, "the plot is working."

"What plot?" demanded the President.

"You can see the effect of such a notion on the country," explained the friend firmly. "They're bound to crucify you for it."

"Me?" cried the President. "Crucify me for what?"

"For thinking that God is writing you letters," cried the friend.

"I have not referred to God or made any statement involving Him in this mystery," said the President coldly.

"Indeed," said the friend and lit a fresh cigar, "you said it was Revelation. And who else can make revelations besides God?"

"I don't know," said the President.

Although every effort was made to keep the bizarre events of the President's study hidden from the world, news of the White House mystery spread. It was garbled news, to be sure. The rumor that billowed through the nation concerned itself with the uncovering of some monstrous plot against the President's life. By nightfall the reports had reached such proportions that a new and corollary whisper became current. This was that the President was dead. Oddly enough, gossip agreed he had been strangled by a close friend while in the White House study. The New Dealers, however, were in a plot to keep the news from the country in order to insure, for a while at least, the continuation of their policies.

Despite the absurdity of this last rumor, it had gained such circulation by midnight that the press took to clamoring

through its representatives in Washington for the President to show himself and be photographed then and there—if he was alive.

This the President, ever ready to outwit the Republican press, was glad to do. At twelve-thirty he appeared in one of the larger drawing-rooms, and allowed a dozen photographers to take flashlight pictures of him. He was in evening dress, having been to a state dinner. Of the curious matters that had thrown the Secret Service and Military Intelligence into so obvious a panic, he refused, however, to make any explanation.

"If anything of any importance happens to me or to the country," the President smiled, "I or my survivors will inform the press immediately. Let me assure you, though, that nobody has shot at me, tried to poison me or blow me up for five whole days, and that if this armistice continues I shall have my message to Congress done on schedule."

The President's mind, so apparently elsewhere, had actually been fastened on the scene in his study upstairs. Here some twenty-five officials, scientists, and Secret Service operatives were assembled. They were standing in a regularly spaced circle around the room and their eyes were intent on the President's still unfinished message to Congress, which lay exposed on the desk. There was no light in the room other than that of the moon in the windows.

The twenty-five vigilantes were armed with various devices as well as weapons. The army had brought over its most recent radio-activity detectors. Three of the scientists present were world-famous psychiatrists on the *qui vive* for evidence of mass hypnosis.

At last the President hurried upstairs. A dozen guards made way for him. He entered the study as smiling and eager as a boy finally arrived at a circus.

"Well, gentlemen," he blurted out, "any more messages?"

There was a stir in the unlit room. The officials in charge assured him nothing had happened and urged him to leave the premises. They hinted that danger lay in the room and that

the conspirators had most obviously planned some final *coup* for this night.

"Well, if you don't want me to go insane," smiled the President, "you'd better let me hang around here. After all, it's my study and it's my writing that somebody is defacing and it's to me that the warning about those ants is being given. I'll just sit here and wait with the rest of you."

The Secret Service chief explained that they had decided to make everything as easy as possible for the villain controlling the radio writing, as the mysterious warnings were now termed. Therefore the vigil would be kept in the dark. All the conditions prevailing at the times of the previous defacements would be duplicated. No one was to go near the desk. The President's message was to lie exposed as it had on the first night. And nothing was to be done to prevent the scrawling of the gibberish. However, a new type of radio-active camera had been trained on the desk. This camera, able to photograph in the dark, was even now taking pictures of what was going on on the desk.

"We are remaining here until dawn," concluded the Secret Service chief.

"So am I," whispered the President, and there was a note of glee in his voice.

Silence had been agreed upon, and the occupants of the room remained without sound. The white page of the manuscript on the desk shone faintly in the dark. Every half-hour the President's friend tiptoed over to examine it, and returned to whisper that nothing had happened yet.

At five o'clock in the morning the Secret Service chief rose from his chair. Dawn was coming.

"Nothing," repeated the friend, after a trip to the desk. He moved toward the President, who had dozed off in his chair.

Alarm was in his voice as he asked: "Are you all right?"

Immediately five Secret Service men turned their flashlights on the Chief Executive. The silence became suddenly full of hissing breaths and a hum of awe and consternation. The voice of the President's friend rose sharply.

"Nobody move," it ordered. "Everybody stay just where they are. I'll take care of him!"

"Take care of whom?" muttered the President, opening his eyes.

"You," said the friend. "Be still, please."

"Lights!" the Chief of Staff demanded.

The study became bright with electricity. The twenty-five figures stood staring excitedly at the Chief Executive.

Rubbing his eyes, the President looked about him and demanded nervously: "What's happened?"

"It's on your shirt front," said the friend hoarsely.

"What's on my shirt front?" the President began, and looked down. "I'm sorry," he added after a pause, "I can't read at this angle."

"It's a message in ink scrawled on your shirt front," repeated the friend.

"I know that," the President answered irritably. "The point is, what does it say?"

The friend looked at him strangely.

"Don't you know?" he asked.

"I told you I can't read it," said the President. "I'm no contortionist."

"Do you have to read it?" said the friend meaningfully.

The President burst into a guffaw.

"Are you suggesting," he managed to say presently, "that I have been writing on my own shirt front?"

"You have had access to it," began the friend, but the President interrupted him.

"Listen," he said in a low but vibrant voice, "use your head. Why would I write a message on my shirt front? Why would I try to confuse the country with that kind of shenanigans?"

"There's some ink on your collar!" cried out the Secret Service chief, who had been examining the President closely during this discussion.

"There are some ink blots on the third bookshelf!" spoke a detective, who, among others, had been combing the room, inch by inch.

"Will somebody kindly read what is written on me," demanded the President, "or must I undress?"

The Chief of Staff stepped forward and saluted.

"It's the same general type of message, sir," he said. "It reads as follows: 'Hurry, hurry, Mt. Navajo, route 9-52, or world lost. Send ant expert. Hurry. Consult atlas.'"

"There's some more of it on the back of his collar," the Secret Service head spoke up.

The President grinned.

"Well, that exonerates me," he said. "I'm no good at writing with the back of my head. What does the collar say?"

"It reads," said the Secret Service chief, "'Can't keep this up much longer. Hurry, for God's sake.'"

"Well," said the President, "the whole thing sounds very impressive to me. This makes the fourth warning about ants. Did anybody ever hear of ants that could eat stone and steel?"

A psychiatrist present who had studied entomology smiled at this absurd layman's question.

"There is no such ant," he stated with scientific finality. "The thing is a hoax from beginning to end."

"I see," said the President and added: "Did anybody see anybody writing on me?"

The Secret Service chief replied nervously after a pause.

"No," he said, "but we expect a number of arrests within the next few hours."

"Mt. Navajo, Mt. Navajo," muttered the President. "Sounds like the Southwest."

He walked toward the bookshelves, where an officer guarded the new ink blots.

"Keep away from those books!" cried the friend and several others.

"Gentlemen," said the President, "if we are to be afraid of books, we may as well resign as human beings."

The room remained silent as the President removed an atlas.

The vigil keepers watched him as he turned the pages of the large, heavy volume. At length the President spoke.

"Here's a Navajo mountain range," he began and then paused, open-mouthed.

"Quick, somebody come here," he whispered.

"What is it?" cried the friend, and the Secret Service men drew out their revolvers and stood in a ring about the Chief Executive.

"An ant," said the President softly. "Somebody pick it up." Both his own hands were occupied. "Look. It's sitting on the Navajo mountains."

The Secret Service chief reached for the volume. By a slight miscalculation the President removed his hands from it before any others received it, and the book fell and slammed shut as it hit the floor. The Secret Service chief picked it up.

"Page two hundred and sixty," said the President.

The atlas was carried to the President's desk and opened. Page two hundred and sixty revealed a detail map of lower California.

And on the map near the Navajo mountain range lay splattered a blot of ink. The squashed remains of an insect protruded from it.

"Was that ink there when you looked at it first?" asked the Secret Service chief.

"No," said the President softly, "there was only an ant."

Two days later, the first telegraphed report from the Federal Mount Navajo Investigation Committee arrived on the President's desk. It read: "Fifty thousand men needed here at once to fight new species stone-eating termite. Termites already undermined several hills and moving northward in incalculable numbers. Will devour nation if not stopped here. Scientific survey of situation follows."

Of the remarkable battle that took place in the Navajo Hills between man and the termites I have little new to add. The two-thousand-mile ditch dug around the enemy's domain and filled with two-thirds of the nation's supply of petroleum appears to have checked, for the time at least, the termite conquest.

As for Gifford Emmett, of him there is no further record.

After several conferences between the President and his advisers it was decided that no reference be made to the blot of ink on the atlas page. The President made a brief address to his Cabinet on his reasons for silence.

"Whoever that Saviour was who came to the rescue of mankind," said the President, "it will be best, I feel certain, to let him die unhonored and unsung. For history shows that only confusion arises from the worship of God's emissaries. We are in the midst of too much confusion today to add to our troubles the hysterias and dissensions which this miraculous ant would bring to our nation and perhaps to the world. If it is God who saved the race, let Him be content that it is saved. And if it is God who sent a Son to us in the guise of an ant, we may well believe He did it in order that we might ignore the Messiah. The Almighty could not very well have sent us a more inconsequential Saviour and one calling more for our indifference—if He desired any practical results. A gnat or a microbe would have been physically incapable of the Divine warning given us. I say, therefore, that we should continue to worship God's previous representatives without adding an ant to the galaxy."

Thus Gifford Emmett's cross was oblivion, which he may well have preferred. I am moved, however, to add an epitaph to the blot of ink that lies in the President's atlas. Of this little blot of ink I write:

Here lies one who hated life, who shuddered before the scurvy inhumanity of the world, who considered with revulsion the record of its endless injustice and triumphant cruelty.

Here lies one whose soul was wasted by the stupidity and barbarism of his fellows, and whose mind, looking out upon the earth, saw it overrun by the inane, the unscrupulous, the aberrant, and the sadistic children of the beast.

Yet here in this little blot of ink lies one who in all that he hated beheld the bright and beleaguered face of tomorrow and died full of hope.

Green Thoughts¹

BY JOHN COLLIER

“Annihilating all that’s made
To a green thought in a green shade.”

MARVELL

The orchid had been sent among the effects of his friend, who had come by a lonely and mysterious death on the expedition. Or he had bought it among a miscellaneous lot, “unclassified,” at the close of the auction. I forget which, but one or the other it certainly was; moreover, even in its dry, brown, dormant root state, this orchid had a certain sinister quality. It looked, with its bunched and ragged projections, like a rigid yet a gripping hand, hideously gnarled, or a grotesquely whiskered, threatening face. Would you not have known what sort of an orchid it was?

Mr. Mannerling did not know. He read nothing but catalogues and books on fertilizers. He unpacked the new acquisition with a solicitude absurd enough in any case towards any orchid, or primrose either, in the twentieth century, but idiotic, foolhardy, doom-eager, when extended to an orchid thus come

¹From *Presenting Moonshine*. Copyright, 1931, by John Collier.

by, in appearance thus. And in his traditional obtuseness he at once planted it in what he called the "Observation Ward," a hothouse built against the south wall of his dumpy red dwelling. Here he set always the most interesting additions to his collection, and especially weak and sickly plants, for there was a glass door in his study wall through which he could see into this hothouse, so that the weak and sickly plants could encounter no crisis without his immediate knowledge and his tender care.

This plant, however, proved hardy enough. At the ends of thick and stringy stalks it opened out bunches of darkly shining leaves, and soon it spread in every direction, usurping so much space that first one, then another, then all its neighbours had to be removed to a hothouse at the end of the garden. It was, Cousin Jane said, a regular hop-vine. At the ends of the stalks, just before the leaves began, were set groups of tendrils, which hung idly, serving no apparent purpose. Mr. Mannering thought that very probably these were vestigial organs, a heritage from some period when the plant had been a climber. But when were the vestigial tendrils of an ex-climber half or quarter so thick and strong?

After a long time sets of tiny buds appeared here and there among the extravagant foliage. Soon they opened into small flowers, miserable little things; they looked like flies' heads. One naturally expects a large, garish, sinister bloom, like a sea anemone, or a Chinese lantern, or a hippopotamus yawning, on any important orchid; and should it be an unclassified one as well, I think one has every right to insist on a sickly and overpowering scent into the bargain.

Mr. Mannering did not mind at all. Indeed, apart from his joy and happiness in being the discoverer and godfather of a new sort of orchid, he felt only a mild and scientific interest in the fact that the paltry blossoms were so very much like flies' heads. Could it be to attract other flies for food or as fertilizers? But then, why like their heads?

It was a few days later that Cousin Jane's cat disappeared. This was a great blow to Cousin Jane, but Mr. Mannering was

not, in his heart of hearts, greatly sorry. He was not fond of the cat, for he could not open the smallest chink in a glass roof for ventilation but the creature would squeeze through somehow to enjoy the warmth, and in this way it had broken many a tender shoot. But before poor Cousin Jane had lamented two days something happened which so engrossed Mr. Mannering that he had no mind left at all with which to sympathize with her affliction, or to make at breakfast kind and hypocritical inquiries after the lost cat. A strange new bud appeared on the orchid. It was clearly evident that there would be two quite different sorts of bloom on this one plant, as sometimes happens in such fantastic corners of the vegetable world, and that the new flower would be very different in size and structure from the earlier ones. It grew bigger and bigger, till it was as big as one's fist.

And just then—it could never have been more inopportune—an affair of the most unpleasant, the most distressing nature summoned Mr. Mannering to town. It was his wretched nephew, in trouble again, and this time so deeply and so very disgracefully that it took all Mr. Mannering's generosity, and all his influence too, to extricate the worthless young man. Indeed, as soon as he saw the state of affairs, he told the prodigal that this was the very last time he might expect assistance, that his vices and his ingratitude had long cancelled all affection between them, and that for this last helping hand he was indebted only to his mother's memory, and to no faith on the part of his uncle either in his repentance or his reformation. He wrote, moreover, to Cousin Jane, to relieve his feelings, telling her of the whole business, and adding that the only thing left to do was to cut the young man off entirely.

When he got back to Torquay, Cousin Jane had disappeared. The situation was extremely annoying. Their only servant was a cook who was very old and very stupid and very deaf. She suffered besides from an obsession, owing to the fact that for many years Mr. Mannering had had no conversation with her in which he had not included an impressive reminder that she must always, no matter what might happen, keep the big kitchen

stove up to a certain pitch of activity. For this stove, besides supplying the house with hot water, heated the pipes in the "Observation Ward," to which the daily gardener who had charge of the other hothouses had no access. By this time she had come to regard her duties as stoker as her chief *raison d'être*, and it was difficult to penetrate her deafness with any question which her stupidity and her obsession did not somehow transmute into an inquiry after the stove, and this, of course, was especially the case when Mr. Mannering spoke to her. All he could disentangle was what she had volunteered on first seeing him, that his cousin had not been seen for three days, that she had left without saying a word. Mr. Mannering was perplexed and annoyed, but, being a man of method, he thought it best to postpone further inquiries until he had refreshed himself a little after his long and tiring journey. A full supply of energy was necessary to extract any information from the old cook; besides, there was probably a note somewhere. It was only natural that before he went to his room Mr. Mannering should peep into the hothouse, just to make sure that the wonderful orchid had come to no harm during the inconsiderate absence of Cousin Jane. As soon as he opened the door his eyes fell upon the bud; it had now changed in shape very considerably, and had increased in size to the bigness of a human head. It is no exaggeration to state that Mr. Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed upon this wonderful bud, for fully five minutes.

But, you will ask, why did he not see her clothes on the floor? Well, as a matter of fact (it is a delicate point), there were no clothes on the floor. Cousin Jane, though of course she was entirely estimable in every respect, though she was well over forty, too, was given to the practice of the very latest ideas on the dual culture of the soul and body—Swedish, German, neo-Greek, and all that. And the orchid-house was the warmest place available. I must proceed with the order of events.

Mr. Mannering at length withdrew his eyes from this stupendous bud and decided that he must devote his attention to the grey exigencies of everyday life. But although his body

dutifully ascended the stairs, heart, mind, and soul all remained in adoration of the plant. Although he was philosophical to the point of insensibility over the miserable smallness of the earlier flowers, yet he was now as much gratified by the magnitude of the great new bud as you or I might be. Hence it was not unnatural that Mr. Mannering while in his bath should be full of the most exalted visions of the blossoming of his heart's darling, his vegetable godchild. It would be the largest known, by far; complex as a dream, or dazzlingly simple. It would open like a dancer, or like the sun rising. Why, it might be opening at this very moment! Mr. Mannering could restrain himself no longer; he rose from the steamy water, and, wrapping his bath-towel robe about him, hurried down to the hothouse, scarcely staying to dry himself, though he was subject to colds.

The bud had not yet opened: it still reared its unbroken head among the glossy, fleshy foliage, and he now saw, what he had no eyes for previously, how very exuberant that foliage had grown. Suddenly he realized with astonishment that this huge bud was not that which had appeared before he went away. That one had been lower down on the plant. Where was it now, then? Why, this new thrust and spread of foliage concealed it from him. He walked across, and discovered it. It had opened into a bloom. And as he looked at this bloom his astonishment grew to stupefaction, one might say to petrification, for it is a fact that Mr. Mannering remained rooted to the spot, with his eyes fixed on the flower, for fully fifteen minutes. The flower was an exact replica of the head of Cousin Jane's lost cat. The similitude was so exact, so lifelike, that Mr. Mannering's first movement, after the fifteen minutes, was to seize his bath-towel robe and draw it about him, for he was a modest man, and the cat, though bought for a Tom, had proved to be quite the reverse. I relate this to show how much character, spirit, *presence*—call it what you will—there was upon this floral cat's face. But although he made to seize his bath-towel robe, it was too late. He could not move. The new lusty foliage had closed in unperceived, the too lightly dismissed tendrils

were everywhere upon him; he gave a few weak cries and sank to the ground, and there, as the Mr. Mannering of ordinary life, he passes out of this story.

Mr. Mannering sank into a coma, into an insensibility so deep that a black eternity passed before the first faint elements of his consciousness reassembled themselves in his brain. For of his brain was the centre of a new bud being made. Indeed, it was two or three days before this at first almost shapeless and quite primitive lump of organic matter had become sufficiently mature to be called Mr. Mannering at all. These days, which passed quickly enough, in a certain mild, not unpleasant excitement, in the outer world, seemed to the dimly working mind within the bud to resume the whole history of the development of our species, in a great many epochal parts.

A process analogous to the mutations of the embryo was being enacted here. At last the entity which was thus being rushed down an absurdly foreshortened vista of the ages arrived, slowing up, into the foreground. It became recognizable. The Seven Ages of Mr. Mannering were presented, as it were, in a series of close-ups, as in an educational film; his consciousness settled and cleared. The bud was mature, ready to open. At this point, I believe, Mr. Mannering's state of mind was exactly that of a patient who, wakening from under an anaesthetic, struggling up from vague dreams, asks plaintively, "Where am I?" Then the bud opened, and he knew.

There was the hothouse, but seen from an unfamiliar angle. There, through the glass door, was his study. There below him was the cat's head and there—there beside him was Cousin Jane. He could not say a word, but then, neither could she. Perhaps it was as well. At the very least, he would have been forced to own that she had been in the right in an argument of long standing; she had always maintained that in the end no good would come of his preoccupation with "those unnatural flowers."

It must be admitted that Mr. Mannering was not at first greatly upset by this extraordinary upheaval in his daily life. This, I think, was because he was interested, not only in pri-

vate and personal matters, but in the wider and more general, one might say the biological, aspects of his metamorphosis. For the rest, simply because he *was* now a vegetable, he responded with a vegetable reaction. The impossibility of locomotion, for example, did not trouble him in the least, or even the absence of body and limbs, any more than the cessation of that stream of rashers and tea, biscuits and glasses of milk, luncheon cutlets, and so forth, that had flowed in at his mouth for over fifty years, but which had now been reversed to a gentle, continuous, scarcely noticeable feeding from below. All the powerful influence of the physical upon the mental, therefore, inclined him to tranquillity. But the physical is not all. Although no longer a man, he was still Mr. Mannering. And from this anomaly, as soon as his scientific interest had subsided, issued a host of woes, mainly subjective in origin.

He was fretted, for instance, by the thought that he would now have no opportunity to name his orchid, or to write a paper upon it, and, still worse, there grew up in his mind the abominable conviction that, as soon as his plight was discovered, it was he who would be named and classified, and that he himself would be the subject of a paper, possibly even of comment and criticism in the lay press. Like all orchid collectors, he was excessively shy and sensitive, and in his present situation these qualities were very naturally exaggerated, so that the bare idea of such attentions brought him to the verge of wilting. Worse yet was the fear of being transplanted, thrust into some unfamiliar, draughty, probably public place. Being dug up! A violent shudder pulsated through all the heavy foliage that sprang from Mr. Mannering's division of the plant. He awoke to consciousness of ghostly and remote sensations in the stem below, and in certain tufts of leaves that sprouted from it; they were somehow reminiscent of spine and heart and limbs. He felt quite a dryad.

In spite of all, however, the sunshine was very pleasant. The rich odour of hot, spicy earth filled the hothouse. From a special fixture on the hot-water pipes a little warm steam oozed into the air. Mr. Mannering began to abandon himself to a

feeling of *laissez-aller*. Just then, up in a corner of the glass roof, at the ventilator, he heard a persistent buzzing. Soon the note changed from one of irritation to a more complacent sound; a bee had managed to find his way after some difficulty through one of the tiny chinks in the metal work. The visitor came drifting down and down through the still, green air, as if into some subaqueous world, and he came to rest on one of those petals which were Mr. Mannering's eyebrows. Thence he commenced to explore one feature after another, and at last he settled heavily on the lower lip, which drooped under his weight and allowed him to crawl right into Mr. Mannering's mouth. This was quite a considerable shock, of course, but on the whole the sensation was neither as alarming nor as unpleasant as might have been expected; indeed, strange as it may sound, the appropriate word seemed to be something like—refreshing.

But Mr. Mannering soon ceased his drowsy toyings with the *mot juste* when he saw the departed bee, after one or two lazy circlings, settle directly upon the maiden lip of Cousin Jane. Ominous as lightning, a simple botanical principle flashed across the mind of her wretched relative. Cousin Jane was aware of it also, although, being the product of an earlier age, she might have remained still blessedly ignorant had not her cousin—vain, garrulous, proselytizing fool!—attempted for years past to interest her in the rudiments of botany. How the miserable man upbraided himself now! He saw two bunches of leaves just below the flower tremble and flutter, and rear themselves painfully upwards into the very likeness of two shocked and protesting hands. He saw the soft and orderly petals of his cousin's face ruffle and incarnadine with rage and embarrassment, then turn sickly as a gardenia with horror and dismay. But what was he to do? All the rectitude implanted by his careful training, all the chivalry proper to an orchid-collector, boiled and surged beneath a paralytically calm exterior. He positively travailed in the effort to activate the muscles of his face, to assume an expression of grief, manly contrition, helplessness in the face of fate, willingness to make

honourable amends, all suffused with the light of a vague but solacing optimism; but it was in vain. When he had strained till his nerves seemed likely to tear under the tension, the only movement he could achieve was a trivial flutter of the left eyelid—worse than nothing.

This incident completely aroused Mr. Mannering from his vegetable lethargy. He rebelled against the limitations of the form into which he had thus been cast while subjectively he remained all too human. Was he not still at heart a man, with a man's hopes, ideals, aspirations—and capacity for suffering?

When dusk came, and the opulent and sinister shapes of the great plant dimmed to a suggestiveness more powerfully impressive than had been its bright noonday luxuriance, and the atmosphere of a tropical forest filled the orchid-house like an exile's dream or the nostalgia of the saxophone; when the cat's whiskers drooped, and even Cousin Jane's eyes slowly closed, the unhappy man remained wide awake, staring into the gathering darkness. Suddenly the light in the study was switched on. Two men entered the room. One of them was his lawyer, the other was his nephew.

"This is his study, as you know, of course," said the wicked nephew. "There's nothing here. I looked round when I came over on Wednesday."

"Ah, well!" said the lawyer. "It's a very queer business, an absolute mystery." He had evidently said so more than once before; they must have been discussing matters in another room. "Well, we must hope for the best. In the meantime, in all the circumstances, it's perhaps as well that you, as next-of-kin, should take charge of things here. We must hope for the best."

Saying this, the lawyer turned, about to go, and Mr. Mannering saw a malicious smile overspread the young man's face. The uneasiness which had overcome him at first sight of his nephew was intensified to fear and trembling at the sight of this smile.

When he had shown the lawyer out, the nephew returned to

the study and looked round him with lively and sinister satisfaction. Then he cut a caper on the hearth-rug. Mr. Mannering thought he had never seen anything so diabolical as this solitary expression of the glee of a venomous nature at the prospect of unchecked sway, here whence he had been outcast. How vulgar petty triumph appeared, beheld thus; how disgusting petty spite, how appalling revengefulness and hardness of heart! He remembered suddenly that his nephew had been notable, in his repulsive childhood, for his cruelty to flies, tearing their wings off, and for his barbarity towards cats. A sort of dew might have been noticed upon the good man's forehead. It seemed to him that his nephew had only to glance that way, and all would be discovered, although he might have remembered that it was impossible to see from the lighted room into the darkness in the hothouse.

On the mantelpiece stood a large unframed photograph of Mr. Mannering. His nephew soon caught sight of this, and strode across to confront it with a triumphant and insolent sneer. "What? You old Pharisee," said he, "taken her off for a trip to Brighton, have you? My God! How I hope you'll never come back! How I hope you've fallen over the cliffs, or got swept off by the tide or something! Anyway—I'll make hay while the sun shines. Ugh! you old skinflint, you!" And he reached forward his hand, on which the thumb held the middle finger bent and in check, and that finger, then released, rapped viciously upon the nose in the photograph. Then the usurping rascal left the room, leaving all the lights on, presumably preferring the dining-room with its cellarette to the scholarly austerities of the study.

All night long the glare of electric light from the study fell full upon Mr. Mannering and his Cousin Jane, like the glare of a cheap and artificial sun. You who have seen at midnight in the park a few insomniac asters standing stiff and startled under an arc light, all their weak colour bleached out of them by the drenching chemical radiance, neither asleep nor awake, but held fast in a tense, a neurasthenic trance, you can form an idea of how the night passed with this unhappy pair.

And towards morning an incident occurred, trivial in itself, no doubt, but sufficient then and there to add the last drop to poor Cousin Jane's discomfiture and to her relative's embarrassment and remorse. Along the edge of a great earthbox in which the orchid was planted ran a small black mouse. It had wicked red eyes, a naked, evil snout, and huge, repellent ears, queer as a bat's. This creature ran straight over the lower leaves of Cousin Jane's part of the plant. It was simply appalling: the stringy main stem writhed like a hair on a coal-fire, the leaves contracted in an agonized spasm, like seared mimosa; the terrified lady nearly uprooted herself in her convulsive horror. I think she would actually have done so, had not the mouse hurried on past her.

But it had not gone more than a foot or so when it looked up and saw, bending over it, and seeming positively to bristle with life, that flower which had once been called Tib. There was a breathless pause. The mouse was obviously paralysed with terror, the cat could only look and long. Suddenly the more human watchers saw a sly frond of foliage curve softly outward and close in behind the hypnotized creature. Cousin Jane, who had been thinking exultantly, "Well, now it'll go away and never, never, never come back," suddenly became aware of hideous possibilities. Summoning all her energy, she achieved a spasmodic flutter, enough to break the trance that held the mouse, so that, like a clock-work toy, it swung round and fled. But already the fell arm of the orchid had cut off its retreat. The mouse leaped straight at it. Like a flash five tendrils at the end caught the fugitive and held it fast, and soon its body dwindled and was gone. Now the heart of Cousin Jane was troubled with horrid fears, and slowly and painfully she turned her weary face first to one side, then to the other, in a fever of anxiety as to where the new bud would appear. A sort of sucker, green and sappy, which twisted lightly about her main stem, and reared a blunt head, much like a tip of asparagus, close to her own, suddenly began to swell in the most suspicious manner. She squinted at it, fascinated and appalled. Could it be her imagination? It was not——

Next evening the door opened again, and again the nephew entered the study. This time he was alone, and it was evident that he had come straight from table. He carried in his hand a decanter of whisky capped by an inverted glass. Under his arm was a siphon. His face was distinctly flushed, and such a smile as is often seen at saloon bars played about his lips. He put down his burdens and, turning to Mr. Mannering's cigar cabinet, produced a bunch of keys which he proceeded to try upon the lock, muttering vindictively at each abortive attempt, until it opened, when he helped himself from the best of its contents. Annoying as it was to witness this insolent appropriation of his property, and mortifying to see the contempt with which the cigar was smoked, the good gentleman found deeper cause for uneasiness in the thought that, with the possession of the keys, his abominable nephew had access to every private corner that was his.

At present, however, the usurper seemed indisposed to carry on investigations; he splashed a great deal of whisky into the tumbler and relaxed into an attitude of extravagant comfort. But after a while the young man began to tire of his own company; he had not yet had time to gather any of his pothouse companions into his uncle's home, and repeated recourse to the whisky bottle only increased his longing for something to relieve the monotony. His eye fell upon the door of the orchid-house. Sooner or later it was bound to have happened. Does this thought greatly console the condemned man when the fatal knock sounds upon the door of his cell? No. Nor were the hearts of the trembling pair in the hothouse at all comforted by the reflection.

As the nephew fumbled with the handle of the glass door, Cousin Jane slowly raised two fronds of leaves that grew on each side, high up on her stem, and sank her troubled head behind them. Mr. Mannering observed, in a sudden rapture of hope, that by this device she was fairly well concealed from any casual glance. Hastily he strove to follow her example. Unfortunately, he had not yet gained sufficient control of his—his *limbs*?—and all his tortured efforts could not raise them

beyond an agonized horizontal. The door had opened, the nephew was feeling for the electric-light switch just inside. It was a moment for one of the superlative achievements of panic. Mr. Mannering was well equipped for the occasion. Suddenly, at the cost of indescribable effort, he succeeded in raising the right frond, not straight upwards, it is true, but in a series of painful jerks along a curve outward and backward, and ascending by slow degrees till it attained the position of an arm held over the possessor's head from behind. Then, as the light flashed on, a spray of leaves at the very end of this frond spread out into a fan, rather like a very fleshy horse-chestnut leaf in structure, and covered the anxious face below. What a relief! And now the nephew advanced into the orchid-house, and now the hidden pair simultaneously remembered the fatal presence of the cat. Simultaneously also, their very sap stood still in their veins. The nephew was walking along by the plant. The cat, a sagacious beast, "knew" with the infallible intuition of its kind that this was an idler, a parasite, a sensualist, gross and brutal, disrespectful to age, insolent to weakness, barbarous to cats. Therefore it remained very still, trusting to its low and somewhat retired position on the plant, and to protective mimicry and such things, and to the half-drunken condition of the nephew, to avoid his notice. But all in vain.

"What?" said the nephew. "What, a cat?" And he raised his hand to offer a blow at the harmless creature. Something in the dignified and unflinching demeanour of his victim must have penetrated into even his besotted mind, for the blow never fell, and the bully, a coward at heart, as bullies invariably are, shifted his gaze from side to side to escape the steady, contemptuous stare of the courageous cat. Alas! His eye fell on something glimmering whitely behind the dark foliage. He brushed aside the intervening leaves that he might see what it was. It was Cousin Jane.

"Oh! Ah!" said the young man, in great confusion. "*You're* back. But what are you hiding there for?"

His sheepish stare became fixed, his mouth opened in bewilderment; then the true condition of things dawned upon his

mind. Most of us would have at once instituted some attempt at communication, or at assistance of some kind, or at least have knelt down to thank our Creator that we had, by his grace, been spared such a fate, or perhaps have made haste from the orchid-house to ensure against accidents. But alcohol had so inflamed the young man's hardened nature that he felt neither fear, nor awe, nor gratitude. As he grasped the situation a devilish smile overspread his face.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" said he. "But where's the old man?"

He peered about the plant, looking eagerly for his uncle. In a moment he had located him and, raising the inadequate visor of leaves, discovered beneath it the face of our hero, troubled with a hundred bitter emotions.

"Hullo, Narcissus!" said the nephew.

A long silence ensued. The nephew was so pleased that he could not say a word. He rubbed his hands together, and licked his lips, and stared and stared as a child might at a new toy.

"Well, you're properly up a tree," he said. "Yes, the tables are turned now all right, aren't they? Ha! Ha! Do you remember the last time we met?"

A flicker of emotion passed over the face of the suffering blossom, betraying consciousness.

"Yes, you can hear what I say," added the tormentor, "feel, too, I expect. What about that?"

As he spoke, he stretched out his hand and, seizing a delicate frill of fine, silvery filaments that grew as whiskers grow round the lower half of the flower, he administered a sharp tug. Without pausing to note, even in the interests of science, the subtler shades of his uncle's reaction, content with the general effect of that devastating wince, the wretch chuckled with satisfaction and, taking a long pull from the reeking butt of the stolen cigar, puffed the vile fumes straight into his victim's centre. The brute!

"How do you like that, John the Baptist?" he asked with a leer. "Good for the blight, you know. Just what you want!"

Something rustled upon his coat sleeve. Looking down, he saw a long stalk, well adorned with the fatal tendrils, groping

its way over the arid and unsatisfactory surface. In a moment it had reached his wrist, he felt it fasten, but knocked it off as one would a leech, before it had time to establish its hold.

"Ugh!" said he. "So that's how it happens, is it? I think I'll keep outside till I get the hang of things a bit. I don't want to be made an Aunt Sally of. Though I shouldn't think they could get you with your clothes on." Struck by a sudden thought, he looked from his uncle to Cousin Jane, and from Cousin Jane back to his uncle again. He scanned the floor, and saw a single crumpled bath-towel robe lying in the shadow.

"Why!" he said. "*Well!*—Haw! Haw! Haw!" And with an odious backward leer, he made his way out of the orchid-house.

Mr. Mannering felt that his suffering was capable of no increase. Yet he dreaded the morrow. His fevered imagination patterned the long night with waking nightmares, utterly fantastic visions of humiliation and torture. Torture! It was absurd, of course, for him to fear cold-blooded atrocities on the part of his nephew, but how he dreaded some outrageous whim that might tickle the youth's sense of humour, and lead him to *any* wanton freak, especially if he were drunk at the time. He thought of slugs and snails, espaliers and topiary. If only the monster would rest content with insulting jests, with wasting his substance, ravaging his cherished possessions before his eyes, with occasional pulling at the whiskers, even! Then it might be possible to turn gradually from all that still remained in him of man, to subdue the passions, no longer to admire or desire, to go native as it were, relapsing into the Nirvana of a vegetable dream. But in the morning he found this was not so easy.

In came the nephew and, pausing only to utter the most perfunctory of jeers at his relatives in the glass house, he sat at the desk and unlocked the top drawer. He was evidently in search of money, his eagerness betrayed that; no doubt he had run through all he had filched from his uncle's pockets, and had not yet worked out a scheme for getting direct control of his bank account. However, the drawer held enough to cause

the scoundrel to rub his hands with satisfaction and, summoning the housekeeper, to bellow into her ear a reckless order upon the wine and spirit merchant.

"Get along with you!" he shouted, when he had at last made her understand. "I shall have to get someone a bit more on the spot to wait on me; I can tell you that. Yes," he added to himself as the poor old woman hobbled away, deeply hurt by his bullying manner, "yes, a nice little parlour-maid—a nice little parlour-maid."

He hunted in the *Buff Book* for the number of the local registry office. That afternoon he interviewed a succession of maidservants in his uncle's study. Those that happened to be plain, or too obviously respectable, he treated curtly and coldly; they soon made way for others. It was only when a girl was attractive (according to the young man's depraved tastes, that is) and also bore herself in a fast or brazen manner, that the interview was at all prolonged. In these cases the nephew would conclude in a fashion that left no doubt at all in the minds of any of his auditors as to his real intentions. Once, for example, leaning forward, he took the girl by the chin, saying with an odious smirk, "There's no one else but me, and so you'd be treated just like one of the family; d'you see, my dear?" To another he would say, slipping his arm round her waist, "Do you think we shall get on well together?"

After this conduct had sent two or three in confusion from the room, there entered a young person of the most regrettable description, one whose character, betrayed as it was in her meretricious finery, her crude cosmetics, and her tinted hair, showed yet more clearly in florid gesture and too facile smile. The nephew lost no time in coming to an arrangement with this creature. Indeed, her true nature was so obvious that the depraved young man only went through the farce of an ordinary interview as a sauce to his anticipations, enjoying the contrast between conventional dialogue and unbridled glances. She was to come next day. Mr. Mannering feared more for his unhappy cousin than for himself. "What scenes may she not have

to witness," he thought, "that yellow cheek of hers to incarnadine?" If only he could have said a few words!

But that evening, when the nephew came to take his ease in the study, it was obvious that he was far more under the influence of liquor than he had been before. His face, flushed patchily by the action of the spirits, wore a sullen sneer, an ominous light burned in that bleared eye, he muttered savagely under his breath. Clearly this fiend in human shape was what is known as "fighting drunk"; clearly some trifle had set his vile temper in a blaze.

It is interesting to note, even at this stage, a sudden change in Mr. Mannering's reactions. They now seemed entirely egoistical, and were to be elicited only by stimuli directly associated with physical matters. The nephew kicked a hole in a screen in his drunken fury, he flung a burning cigar-end down on the carpet, he scratched matches on the polished table. His uncle witnessed this with the calm of one whose sense of property and of dignity has become numbed and paralysed; he felt neither fury nor mortification. Had he, by one of those sudden strides by which all such development takes place, approached much nearer to his goal, complete vegetation? His concern for the threatened modesty of Cousin Jane, which had moved him so strongly only a few hours earlier, must have been the last dying flicker of exhausted altruism; that most human characteristic had faded from him. The change, however, in its present stage, was not an unmixed blessing. Narrowing in from the wider and more expressly human regions of his being, his consciousness now left outside its focus not only pride and altruism, which had been responsible for much of his woe, but fortitude and detachment also, which, with quotations from the Greek, had been his support before the whole battery of his distresses. Moreover, within its constricted circle, his ego was not reduced but concentrated, his serene, flowerlike indifference towards the ill-usage of his furniture was balanced by the absorbed, flowerlike single-mindedness of his terror at the thought of similar ill-usage directed towards himself.

Inside the study the nephew still fumed and swore. On the

mantelpiece stood an envelope, addressed in Mr. Mannering's handwriting to Cousin Jane. In it was the letter he had written from town, describing his nephew's disgraceful conduct. The young man's eye fell upon this and, unscrupulous, impelled by idle curiosity, he took it up and drew out the letter. As he read, his face grew a hundred times blacker than before.

"What," he muttered, "'a mere race-course cad . . . a worthless vulgarian . . . a scoundrel of the sneaking sort' . . . and what's this? ' . . . cut him off absolutely . . . ' What?" said he, with a horrifying oath. "*Would* you cut me off absolutely? Two can play at that game, you old devil!"

And he snatched up a large pair of scissors that lay on the desk and burst into the hothouse——

Among fish, the dory, they say, screams when it is seized upon by man; among insects, the caterpillar of the death's-head moth is capable of a still, small shriek of terror; in the vegetable world, only the mandrake could voice its agony—till now.

Mr. Sycamore¹

BY ROBERT AYRE

For a long time now John Gwilt had been meditating a change in his way of life. John Gwilt was forty-five and he had been a postman in the town of Smeed, plodding the streets of Smeed mechanically, punctually, up and down, back and forth, day in and day out, rain and shine and snow and slush, for twenty years, never hoisting his bag on his back without a sigh of weariness and never casting it off at the end of the route without a groan of relief.

While his wife, Jane, knew of his discontent, she was nevertheless somewhat surprised when he announced, one evening at supper, his intention of becoming a tree.

"I'm tired of locomotion," he explained. "I've had my fill of tramp-tramp-tramping all day long and trudging up and down stairs. I've made up my mind to stand still for the rest of my life."

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Mrs. Gwilt looked at him and sighed. She looked at him and bowed her head and said, "What's to be, will be." She was a religious woman. She sighed and asked her husband if he would have more coffee.

"The house is paid for," said John Gwilt, passing his cup, "there is a little money in the bank, and I have kept up the insurance. You will be well provided for, Jane."

"I could take a few piano pupils." There was just a touch of reproach in Mrs. Gwilt's gesture as she turned the wedding ring on her finger.

"That will not be necessary. I said you would be well provided for."

"When do you intend to——?" she hardly knew how to put it.

"Make the change? There is nothing to be gained by putting it off," he replied, blinking excitedly behind his glasses. "Spring has come. The time is now. This very minute!"

Jane was scrupulously picking crumbs off the tablecloth, one by one, and placing them on her plate. "You might wipe the dishes for me before you go," she said sadly.

"Wipe the dishes? Why?"

"Just for the sake of sentiment," said Jane, studying the crumbs. "You used to do it, the first year we were married. Don't you remember? But it doesn't matter," she added, as she looked up and saw the expression on his face.

"I think we'd better go out to the yard and get started before it's too dark," said John Gwilt firmly.

"You know best, John," she sighed. "But—wouldn't it be wise to ask somebody's advice?"

John Gwilt frowned. "Why should I ask anyone's advice? *Whose* advice? I know what I'm doing. Jane, this is not a sudden notion. I've been thinking about it seriously for a long time. Too long," he said, rising abruptly and laying his hand on the table as if he were about to deliver a speech. "Too long! I do not intend to put it off another minute!"

So they went out to the little yard at the back of the house, John carrying the spade and Jane a bucket of water. A garden,

Jane called it, because she usually had a row of sweet peas clinging to a network of strings tacked on Dogan's fence, and a battalion of sunflowers presenting arms along the lane; but it was just a yard, closed in by the house, by the back fence, and by the neighbors' fences on either side; in a corner, by the gate the coal men used, stood the garbage cans and the mound of winter ashes from the basement; a plank walk zigzagged down the centre, more or less under the clothesline, for Jane's feet in wet weather: it divided the yard into two, an attempt at a lawn on Staines's side, and Jane's sweet peas, nasturtiums and rhubarb on the other.

"This line," said John Gwilt, with authority, "will have to come down."

"But, John——" Jane's mouth dropped open. "Where shall I hang the clothes? I must have a line!"

"You'll have to make some other arrangement." He was lifting the planks and piling them beside the ashpile.

"I hope you are not going to be a very big tree—an oak, or anything like that," Jane ventured. "The garden is small enough."

"Leave that to me," said John, busy winding up the clothesline. He tied it in a loop and left it hanging on the hook beside the kitchen door. "I always wanted a tree in the back yard."

"We have the honeysuckle in front——"

John Gwilt grunted. "Do you call that thing a tree?"

"Well, what kind are you going to be, John?"

"Leave that to me," he repeated. (The truth was, he did not know.)

"Where do you want to be planted, then?"

"Right in the centre of the yard. Why do you think I took down the line? I want plenty of room to spread my branches."

"I do hope you will be prudent," Jane murmured. She sighed and began worrying about the clothesline.

John was busy measuring with his eye the distance from the fence on either side, but he was aware of his wife's thoughts. "Remember," he warned her. "I won't have you fastening any

clotheslines to my trunk. You'll have to find some other way of hanging out the wash."

At this point, Fred Staines, the barber, put his head over the fence and saw his neighbors with bucket and spade.

"What are you putting in this year, Mrs. Gwilt?" he asked. "I'm taking a shot at dahlias, myself."

The Gwilt did not answer. John was grimly sinking the spade into the hard soil and Jane was standing by, watching, with her arms wrapped in her apron and crossed over her chest—it was a raw evening.

"You'll need to make it fairly deep," she said.

"What on earth are you digging a hole there for?" asked Fred Staines, gaping over the fence. "Are you burying something?"

"No we're not burying anything," said John Gwilt, in a tone that offered no encouragement.

"Well, that's good," said the barber. "I thought maybe Solomon was dead. What are you planting, then?" he persisted, after a pause.

"John," said Mrs. Gwilt.

Mr. Staines uttered an exclamation of surprise and gazed blankly at the digger.

In a few words, Jane enlightened him. "John," she said, "has decided to turn himself into a tree. He's tired of marching up and down the streets of Smeed with the mailbag."

"Well, I'll be dog!" said Fred Staines.

"A tree has an easy enough life of it," he admitted, as an afterthought.

John Gwilt leaned on his spade and looked up. "Believe me," he declared, "the trees have the right idea."

"It certainly is an original idea," said the barber, staring at John.

"I wish I had done it sooner."

John Gwilt turned again to his digging. "I think the hole is deep enough," he said to his wife, after a while. He stepped in. "Yes, it comes half way up my shins. And my roots will strike down deeper, of course."

He sat on the new-thrown earth and pulled off his shoes and socks. The barber vanished.

"You're not going to undress, John?" asked Jane, in alarm.

"No, not until I get my bark." But he rolled his trousers up to his knees.

"Ah!" he sighed, "how good the earth feels to the feet! So cool! So cool!" He stretched his toes and said, "All right, Jane, spade the soil in around my legs." He stood up and balanced himself firmly on his soles and heels. I'll be a long time standing, he thought, and I might as well be comfortable from the start. "Pack it down firmly and then water me and pack it down again."

She was so awkward that John took the spade out of her hands and scraped the soil toward him. I suppose I made the hole wider than was necessary, he thought. "All right, that will have to do. Pour the water—— Ugh! it's cold!" He shuddered as she overturned the bucket. "Never mind, pack the earth down some more." He gritted his teeth. "Look out, Jane! You'll graze my shin!"

Jane dropped to her knees and patted the earth with the palms of her hands, and as she patted she was seized with a sudden misgiving. Jane Gwilt was a reader of poetry. She sat back on her heels, holding her muddy hands stiffly in front of her, and said in a hushed voice: "But John, are you sure you are doing right? I thought that only God could——"

"Let us not go into that!" John Gwilt said, with his teeth clenched: "*and please never quote those abominable verses.*"

"I hope you're not doing anything sinful, John, that's all," said Mrs. Gwilt, with grave concern.

"You leave that to me," said John Gwilt, a little more gently. He unhooked the spectacles from behind his ears and handed them to her. Before taking them, Jane wiped her hands on her apron. "I won't need these any more," he said. "Keep them. The shoes you may send to the post office." He grinned broadly and wagged his head. "Send the shoes to the post office. Ha, ha, ha! The shoes belong to the post office. With my compliments. But I can do what I like with my feet!" He began

to laugh a little hysterically. "And I'm never going to make them walk again!"

"How does it feel, John?" The barber's head appeared over the fence again and beside it the head of Mrs. Staines.

"You have no idea how comfortable the cool soil is to the feet," said John Gwilt happily.

Mrs. Staines asked how long he expected it would take.

"Oh, I can't tell you to the hour," John replied. "Not long."

"Won't you get tired standing?"

"No more tired than I have been walking these twenty years and more. When I am well-rooted, I won't be tired."

He stretched and wriggled his shoulders and beamed. "Did you ever hear of a tree getting tired? Listen!" he cried exultantly, "I'll have hold of the earth, I'll be anchored to it, I'll be part of it! Do you understand? I'll draw its strength into my trunk and all my branches, into every twig and leaf! Oh, no, Mrs. Staines, I don't see myself getting tired!" He swelled his chest and smiled at her indulgently.

"What I can't understand," said Fred Staines, with a puzzled frown, "is how you're going to do it."

John Gwilt blinked, folded his arms and looked him square in the eye. "I passed with honors in my correspondence course——"

The barber looked at him incredulously. "Do you mean to tell me they give courses into how to turn yourself into trees? If that doesn't beat all!" he exclaimed.

John Gwilt snorted and Jane answered: "It's the Will Power course he means. How to Cultivate the Will in Twenty Lessons."

"Mmn. So you're doing it by Will Power, eh?"

"When you are listening to Amos and Andy," said John Gwilt, raising a solemn forefinger, "and long after you are in bed and sound asleep, I'll be standing here, alone in the dark, willing myself into a tree."

"To my way of thinking, it doesn't seem quite Christian," Mrs. Staines observed, pursing her lips.

Jane sighed. "There, John, I told you."

"We needn't start that, Jane," said John Gwilt, with a warning edge on his voice. "Mrs. Staines, I don't think you'll find anything in your Bible against it. Besides," he added, "I am a pre-Christian."

"John was always a great reader," Jane explained, chastened. She looked regretfully at the glasses.

"I am sure we all wish you well, Mr. Gwilt," said the barber's wife, charitably, but pursing her lips for all that and adding, "though I won't admit I understand it."

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio," said John Gwilt, "than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Mrs. Staines, slightly piqued, withdrew, and her husband called: "Good luck, John! See how you're getting along, later."

"I'll go in and fetch your hat, John," said Jane. "You haven't much hair, you know, and you might catch cold in the night."

"Never mind the hat," John said ungratefully. "I'm not going to make myself look ridiculous. You'd better get your dishes done and leave me here to concentrate."

"Very well, John. If you need anything, just call."

John grunted and she gathered up his shoes and socks and went sadly into the house, leaving him standing there with his feet planted in the ground.

"What a balmy evening!" he exclaimed, stretching and taking a deep breath. Down the lane, someone was burning leaves, and he drank in the acrid smell with pleasure, until the thought occurred to him that it might be indelicate for him, a future tree, to enjoy the smell of burning leaves. A little ghoulish? he wondered, and turned his attention to a robin trilling on a telephone wire. "Ah, spring!" he murmured, and then he pulled himself together and began willing.

As she washed the dishes, mournfully reflecting that she would have only half the number to do in future, Jane kept peeping out of the window, but John was standing quite still,

rigid, with his arms folded and his eyes fixed on a knothole in the back fence, exerting his Will Power, and she did not like to disturb him.

When she did come out, an hour later, he said: "Jane, you might bring me one of the kitchen chairs. I'm not used to it, you know, and I find I am getting a little fatigued."

"But you'll grow crooked," she protested mildly.

Nodding his head, he agreed that she was right. He frowned stoically and stiffened his spine.

"Is there any change yet?" Jane asked, with wifely solicitude.

John took stock of how he felt and replied that he thought his toes were striking root. "It feels a bit like rheumatism," he said.

"I'm afraid you'll catch your death of cold," sighed Jane.

"A bit stiff, eh?" asked Fred Staines, appearing at the fence.

"Oh, nothing to speak of," said John.

"You'll be stiffer before morning," the barber remarked cheerfully. "Early in the season, you know, and the paper says a drop in temperature."

"I expect to be stiffer."

"It isn't as if he was used to it," Jane sighed. "John was never given to sitting on flagpoles or anything like that, you know."

The barber suggested that it might have been good training.

"I don't believe in wasting time on frivolity," snorted John Gwilt. "I never held with those marathon contests."

"What are you going to do in winter?" asked the barber.

"It's a long time until winter," said John Gwilt. "I'll do what the other trees do. Hibernate. I won't," he added pointedly, "be stoking any furnaces. And I won't be plowing through snowdrifts in a heavy overcoat and galoshes."

Jane began to wonder what was to be done with his winter undergarments and his other clothing, but she refrained from mentioning such things in the hearing of the neighbors.

Fred Staines leaned on the fence, smoking his pipe and gazing thoughtfully at the postman.

"What kind of a tree are you aiming to turn into?" he asked, at length.

"A Christmas tree," said John Gwilt whimsically. "Jane's going to deck me out in tinsel next Christmas and hang lollipops on my branches and festoon me with strings of colored lights, aren't you, Jane? And load me down with presents for Daisy and Billy Staines and the Bellows children. For once, I'll have arms enough to carry the Christmas parcels, and everybody *will come to me* to get them! Jane!" he said, warming with enthusiasm and throwing his arms wide. "I want to give a grand party! Invite the Martins and the Bellows and the McCorkindales! And let all the youngsters join hands and dance around me in the snow!"

"This is no time for joking, John," said Mrs. Gwilt, turning away with a sniff.

"But, my dear, I mean it! I want you to have a good time when I am meta——" He approached the word gingerly and then plunged recklessly in: "metamorphosized."

It sounds so much worse than plain "dead," thought Jane.

"And I want to be in the midst of the fun."

"It should be a swell party," Fred Staines observed. "We'll drink your health, John."

"In hot, steaming punch! I'll probably be asleep, you know, like the other trees; but I'll feel Christmas coming on—excitement in the air, bells, carol singers—and I'll wake up all of a tingle, as I used to when I was a youngster, and find my branches tangled in tinsel and lights—don't forget the lights, Jane: you can get them at the fifteen-cent store—and dolled up like the Arabian Nights in those pretty bubbles—red, blue, green, silver, gold! with a gleaming star on top!" His eyes blinked and sparkled, he threw his arms about, and Jane was a little taken aback: it did not seem like John. "And see you all joining hands and dancing round and round——"

"Round and round the maypole," said Fred Staines, a trifle pityingly, as he knocked his pipe out on the fence; and Jane was humiliated. With his excitement snuffed, John Gwilt turned sulky.

"Well, good night," said Fred Staines. "Don't let the boll weevil get you, ha, ha!"

"The boll weevil doesn't attack trees," said John Gwilt stiffly.

Jane went into the house and brought out a blanket. In spite of her husband's sullen protest, she wrapped it about his shoulders, and in spite of his protest he was grateful for the warmth. But he was obstinate about the hat.

Jane lingered irresolutely. At last she said, "Good night, John," and kissed him; and, not knowing whether she would ever see her husband in his familiar shape again, the wife went in to her lonely bed.

John Gwilt wrapped the blankets more closely about his shivering shoulders and took a deep breath to steady himself. Then, after listening intently and looking around fearfully, he lowered his body to a crouch, to rest his weary limbs.

Perhaps it would be more comfortable if I turned myself into a bush, after all, he thought weakly. But he had not been squatting a moment when out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a flash of light. Jane Gwilt had gone into the bedroom. He straightened himself just as she came to the window to lower the blind. So when Jane looked out she saw her husband raised to his full height. She could not make him out very well in the dark, but the figure was upright and straight, proud and resolute. John Gwilt, after a momentary aberration, had returned to the dignity of his ambition. It would never do, he thought, for Jane to suspect that his Will Power was faltering. Women set such little store by these manly virtues.

So with faith in her husband unshaken, but quite forlornly, Jane waved to him and pulled down the blind. For a time, John stretched his neck and gazed at the narrow slit of light that showed beneath and imagined Jane undressing and smearing her face with cold cream and kneeling in her nightgown to say her prayers. Then the light was extinguished and the house was in darkness. John Gwilt sighed. He thought of the warm bed and the contented ticking of the clock; he shuddered; a pang of nostalgia and wild regret sprang into his

heart and then died as he stiffened his body and exerted his Will. "What John Gwilt has begun, John Gwilt will end," he said aloud.

He began consoling himself with the memories of twenty years, of burning feet and weary limbs, and shoulders aching from the weight of the mailbag. No more, he thought. Rest at last, he sighed happily. I might have found rest in death, of course, but why go to such extremes? I want to live. In my own quiet way. The resentment at Fred Staines's gibe still rankled, but he smiled and allowed himself to become indulgent. "Calm and spacious," he murmured. "The ideal of Confucius. How seldom mankind attains it."

Half asleep, he fell to dreaming of the long serene years that stretched before him; of springs, when the sap would begin to stir painfully, deliciously, in his limbs—like the tingling return of the blood when your foot has been asleep—; when the twigs would thrust themselves out eagerly into buds, when the buds would burst into leaves; of summers, when he would spread his leaves against the sunlight and make a shimmering green shape against the blue sky and the piled up clouds, when his boughs would heave in the wind, and the rain would go sluicing down his broad trunk; of autumns, when he would be startled by the first sting of the frost and would turn suddenly to discover that the birds had gone and that the jingling of the crickets was slackening and that the year was running down; when his leaves would glow in a new color—I wonder if it will feel like sunburn? he asked himself—when he would gradually sink into the winter sleep, profound, deep, lost within himself, never regretting the leaves scattered over the grass, never feeling them go, less aware of their going than he had been of the thinning of his hair. There would always be new leaves.

The jazz band on the barber's radio ceased its monotonous drumming and wheedling; the light in the window went out; reappeared in the bathroom window; went out. Fred Staines had gone to bed. A motor car rushed by in the street and was quiet; a clock chimed and was quiet. The darkness gathered

closer, and John Gwilt, huddling in his blanket, looked up at the cold, glittering stars.

In the morning, when Jane Gwilt awoke, she was for a moment bewildered at finding herself alone in bed. With a start, she remembered where John was and her heart pumped and thumped as she threw back the covers and ran to the window. Has it happened? She wondered; or shall I see John stretched out dead? Or suppose something went wrong and he is changed into a fence post or a pillar of salt or something? What if his Will Power wouldn't work and he has run away in shame?

But there stood her husband as she had left him the night before, with his feet planted in the ground and the gray blanket around his shoulders. He looked more woebegone, perhaps, as he turned at the sound she made opening the window; his head rose red and bald out of the folds of the blanket; what little hair he had was damp and wispy, and as he was about to speak his body was wrenched by a violent sneeze.

Oh, dear, thought Jane, I should have given him a hot water bottle. "I'll be down as soon as I get something on," she called.

Before coming out, she set the kettle boiling. It was a chilly morning and the sky was overcast. Rain, she thought; he'll catch his death.

"How do you feel, John?" she asked anxiously, laying her hand on his forehead.

John replied in a voice like felt, but he said, "Fine. Fi——" and sneezed again.

"John, I think you'd better put this off until the weather gets warmer. It's going to rain and you'll catch your——"

"No, I won't catch my death of cold!" retorted John Gwilt. "And I have no intention of putting 'this,' as you call it, off. The transformation has begun."

"Oh, John! How do you know?"

"*How do I know!*" He sneezed and Jane hastened to mollify

him. "All right, John, I suppose you know. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You could bring me a handkerchief." He sneezed again. "Get me a handkerchief, quick! Two or three of them!"

"John, John! I knew you'd——"

He was about to explode, so she fled to the house.

"Can you take any nourishment?" Jane asked on her return. "A bowl of corn flakes?"

"Who ever heard of a tree eating corn flakes!" John Gwilt demanded contemptuously.

Jane sighed. John blew his nose. "Bring me some bacon and eggs. And coffee, quarts of coffee."

The good wife carried out the card table and set it up in front of her husband. "It won't be easy to eat, standing," she suggested, "but the table will help." She spread her luncheon cloth over it and laid out John's napkin, rolled in his own silver ring, and a knife and fork, salt and pepper and mustard pot, a pat of butter on a saucer and a jar of marmalade.

As she stood back to appraise the table, she cast an apprehensive look at the lowering sky.

"No frills, Jane," said John Gwilt. "Hurry up with the bacon and eggs."

Time was, thought Jane, when he couldn't get enough of my marmalade, and now he calls it frills; but I suppose trees have no taste for such things. She was gratified, however, to see her husband devour his breakfast with voracious appetite, in spite of his cold and the awkwardness of his position; he smeared his toast, and even his bacon, with the marmalade, drank the coffee pot dry, and lighted his pipe.

Fred Staines came to the fence as Jane was clearing the table. "Well, John," he observed brightly, "you'll soon be missing all these good things."

John Gwilt threw off the blanket in a spasm of embarrassment and shrugged his shoulders. Taking the pipe out of his mouth, he said gruffly: "I'll have better things. I find," he added, looking a little wryly at the pipe, "that I'm losing my

human appetites." He was disappointed in the pipe because of his cold.

"How does it feel, after a night of it?" asked the barber. "Pretty chilly, eh?"

"Might be worse," said John Gwilt.

"Would you like anything else, dear?" asked Jane. "You didn't read the *Sun* last night. I saved it for you——"

"No thank you," John said. "When I leave the world, I leave the world."

"Like going into a monastery," Fred Staines remarked, tussling his own scalp with a forefinger.

"Oh, John isn't a Catholic," said Mrs. Gwilt, with a little agitation.

"I don't care what happens to the entire human race," John Gwilt said flatly. "I agree with the scientist who said it was an accident, or a sort of epidemic attacking the beautiful body of Nature. I wash my hands of the human race."

The last remark prompted Mrs. Gwilt to ask if her husband wished to make his morning toilet.

"A little dirt won't hurt me," said John, examining his hands. "After this, I am part of the earth."

"If you would like me to shave you—if you think it would be easier——" Fred Staines suggested, rubbing his chin, "it won't cost you anything."

"I'm not an invalid," said John Gwilt stiffly. "And I'm not to be pitied because I'm turning myself into a tree. If you had any sense, you'd know I was to be envied."

"Well, I can't say I envy you," said Fred Staines, rather nettled.

John Gwilt intended to shrug disdainfully but sneezed instead and the barber said he had better be going to the shop.

"Shall I bring your mug and brush?" Jane asked.

"No, thank you, my dear," said John Gwilt. "I don't expect to be making any calls today." He smiled benignly.

Like a wind that sets all the flags fluttering, the news spread about Smeed, and throughout the morning the neighbors trooped down the lane and stood at John Gwilt's fence, gaping

at him and plying him with questions. It began to rain but the gossips were loath to move and they had a merry moment when Mrs. Gwilt appeared with an umbrella for her husband.

He waved her away, whispering hoarsely that the rain was just what he needed, but she prevailed (he did not want to make a scene) and he found the umbrella useful to shut out the throng at the fence.

"Gibber away, you fools!" he muttered to himself. "There is more dignity in one tree than in a whole pack of chattering chimpanzees." He refused to answer their questions or to acknowledge their taunts, but, holding the umbrella in front of his face and gazing intently at its ribs, he doggedly went on with his willing.

No less a person than the Postmaster himself, Harry Oikle, broke in upon his concentration.

The crowd fell back respectfully as the Postmaster pushed through, unbarred the gate and strode across the yard to where John Gwilt was planted.

Oh, dear, thought Jane, I knew he should have shaved!

"Well, Gwilt," said Mr. Oikle, with heavy indulgence, "what's all this foolishness?"

John Gwilt raised his umbrella and blinked at the Postmaster, while Jane watched from the kitchen door, all of a tremble. For a second, he felt cowed, and, for a second, brave and triumphant; both impulses resolved themselves into a sneeze.

"Come, come, John," said the Postmaster, "pull on your socks and get off to work."

"I have something better to do, Mr. Oikle," said John Gwilt.

"Rubbish! You're making yourself the laughing-stock of the whole town, that's what you're doing."

"Only fools laugh at wise men, Mr. Oikle," said John Gwilt mildly.

The Postmaster surveyed him incredulously. "So you consider yourself a wise man, do you?"

The gossips at the fence laughed and nudged one another and tapped their heads.

John Gwilt blew his nose resolutely, and carefully tucked the handkerchief into his pocket. Then he raised his chin, just a little impertinently, and blinked. Then he sneezed, and the crowd laughed again.

"I suppose you know what we do with wise men, Mr. Gwilt?" said the Postmaster. He spoke with significant deliberation and looked John steadily in the eye.

John Gwilt's eyes twinkled. "I'll wait right here," he said. "I won't budge an inch." He raised his head and grinned at the Postmaster. "But you'll never catch me."

Mr. Oikle shrugged, but he left the yard with a puzzled face and did not acknowledge the greeting of Caleb Hoop, editor of the *Smeed Sun*, who had elbowed his way through the crowd and now stood squinting at John Gwilt.

"What's the idea?" Hoop demanded, rolling a cigar between his lips.

John Gwilt looked back at him and made no reply.

"Doing it for a bet?"

Mr. Gwilt sniffed. "What use has a tree for money?"

"Then why are you doing it?"

"Who wants to know?" asked John Gwilt, blandly.

"Don't you know who I am?" The visitor brought out a card. "Hoop. Editor of the *Sun*."

"Oh, I see." John looked at the name. "You want to put a piece in the paper about me."

"You guessed it. It isn't every day a man turns himself into a tree. Naturally the public's interested. Look at the crowd out in the lane there."

Although he protested that he was not seeking publicity, Mr. Gwilt could not help glowing with pleasure and he asked the editor if he would like a photograph.

"The only photograph we have, dear," piped up Mrs. Gwilt, who had ventured out, "is the snap I took at the picnic last summer——"

"Fine!" the editor broke in, steering jaw and cigar in her direction.

"But," said Jane, hesitantly, "it's not a very good one, I'm

afraid. You see, I didn't hold the camera just right and Mr. Gwilt's head was cut off."

Mr. Hoop smirked. "We'd need the head. Haven't you got anything else?"

"There's the wedding picture," said John Gwilt.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to part with that!"

"It's all right, Mrs. Gwilt," the editor reassured her. "We'll send it back O.K. A wedding picture would be just the thing. I'd like to get you in, too."

"Oh," protested Jane, "I haven't done anything."

"You're the wife, aren't you?"

Jane blushed and said, "I'll have to fetch it. It's in the album."

"Got any shots of him as a little boy or anything?" the editor called after her. "Bring the whole caboodle. Or I'll come in with you and look at the album in the parlor. It's kind of wet out here, anyway."

"Wait a minute," said John Gwilt. His wife hesitated while he sneezed and blew his nose.

"Never mind bringing the album, Jane."

"There's one of you on the rocking horse when you were five," she reminded him. "It's quite a cute one. He has a curl down the middle of his forehead," she told the editor, "and one over each ear."

"Fine!" said the editor. "Bring it along too!"

Mrs. Gwilt looked questioningly at her husband.

"No!" John cried. "The wedding photo will be enough."

Hoop stood munching his cigar and eyeing John Gwilt. "Well, it's an original notion, anyway," he remarked, not without admiration.

John Gwilt blinked at him and said, not without contempt: "I make no claims for originality. You don't seem to have read your Greek history."

"Well, the stunt hasn't been pulled off in Smeed before."

"If you think this is a stunt, like sitting on a flagpole, you're mistaken, Mr. Hoop."

"What do you call it then? A scientific experiment, like go-

ing up into the stratosphere or talking to the dead? What do you expect to find out?"

"I expect to find out something about dignity and peace," said John Gwilt.

"Poise and repose." The editor was thinking in headlines. He screwed his face into a coarse wink and nodded toward the house. "Storm and strife, eh?"

Mentally, he jotted it down:

HARRIED HUBBY
SEEKS SURCEASE

"Jane and I are quite happy," said John Gwilt loftily. "Domestic relations have nothing to do with my decision."

"Just tired of life, eh? Just another poor mortal weary of the grind."

"If I was tired of life," said John Gwilt, "I could blow my brains out."

"That's true, too: it isn't as simple as straight suicide."

"I love life," said John Gwilt, "but I don't like the life I have been forced to live for the past twenty years. I am a man of contemplative disposition."

The editor nodded. "Philosopher, eh?"

"Naturally, to a man of contemplative disposition," said John Gwilt, gravely and deliberately, speaking for publication, "there comes a time when he wearies of the hurly-burly——"

"That's right," said the editor. "I always go fishing, myself."

Throughout the conversation, he stood chewing his cigar, with his hands thrust deep in his raincoat pockets. The philosopher was a little disturbed because the editor was not taking notes. "Do you," he ventured, "remember all your interviews?"

"Don't you worry about that, Mr. Gwilt," said the editor. "I'm an old hand at this game. I won't misquote you. What gave you the idea of turning into a tree?"

"Isn't it perfectly logical? I couldn't remain a postman and enjoy the contemplative life."

The editor nodded. "But couldn't you have retired?"

"I don't know if you newspapermen are at all inclined to the mystical," began John Gwilt. He looked up, to see that the rain had cleared, shut his umbrella and stood leaning on the crook. He blinked his watery eyes and continued, gazing far beyond the thick body of the editor. "In the first place, I couldn't retire. I couldn't afford it. They don't give you a pension at forty-five. It would mean that Mrs. Gwilt would have to find some way of supporting me."

"No self-respecting man could allow that," said Mr. Hoop, looking at him quizzically.

"Certainly not."

"And yet," said the editor, cocking one eye at him, "she will have to support you, after all."

"That I deny," said John Gwilt impressively. "I shall be entirely self-supporting. Trees get their food and drink out of the earth and air—you should know that—and they grow their own clothes."

"Ah!" Mr. Hoop interrupted. "I see a solution for the unemployment problem. If we could plant a few hundred thousand men and change them——"

"I am not interested in the unemployment problem," said John Gwilt. "It is only one example of human insanity. But I'm telling you I won't cost Jane a penny. Not if I live to be a hundred. And I'm not leaving my wife in the lurch," he added, watching to make sure that his words were being marked. "She is well provided for. There is plenty for one to live on. Nobody can accuse me of shirking my responsibility, even if I am changing my way of life."

The editor wagged his head and struggled to light the ruins of his cigar.

"If I live to be a hundred," John Gwilt repeated musingly. "We got sidetracked on material things, Mr. Hoop, but I started to say something about the real reason for choosing to be a tree. I told you I loved life. I want to be alive, really

alive; I want to live in the earth's way. We are all estranged. Do you understand what I mean? We are broken off from the earth. I want to be part of the earth's life. I am tired of this helpless fluttering, all this hurrying and scurrying: it isn't dignified; it isn't sane; I want to stand still."

"If you ask me," said the editor, "I think you're just plain tuckered out, Mr. Gwilt."

"I'll go on living, for a hundred years—a thousand!" John Gwilt exclaimed, not hearing him. "Never suffering the pains and miseries of growing old; enjoying the sun and the wind and the rain, too, for a change; the blue sky in the morning and the twinkling stars at night; watching the world go by; watching Smeed grow up around me. I only hope," he said, in a wistful afterthought, "that the town doesn't grow too rapidly in this neighborhood. I'd hate to be hemmed in by a horde of belching factories, choking my foliage with grime and soot."

He leaned on his umbrella, lost in dreams, while the editor worried his cigar.

"You know," said the editor presently, "it mightn't be a bad idea for the town to set aside a sanctuary around you."

"A sanctuary? Around me?" Tears sprang into John Gwilt's eyes.

"Yes, by golly! There's great possibilities in that idea. I'll have to get busy and do something. Get people talking. Start a fund. Good publicity for the *Sun*, good publicity for the town. You'll be a great tourist attraction, Mr. Sycamore, or whatever you're going to be! Smeed can't afford to slip up on a chance like this!"

John Gwilt was a little disturbed. "I'm not fond of crowds, you know," he stammered.

"Listen, Mr. Gwilt," said the editor, wagging the cigar at him, "listen to me. You'd like to be a benefactor of your town, wouldn't you? You'd like to go down in history, wouldn't you? Before I get through with this story, the whole civilized world will be flocking to Smeed to see you! Think of the business it'll bring to the town! Think of the railways and the hotels and the filling stations and the tourist camps! Think of the hot-dog

stands, think of the souvenir stores! By golly, Gwilt, you'll be the making of this town! You never thought of that, did you?"

In his enthusiasm, he injured the cigar beyond repair. John Gwilt stood blinking at him, in a daze.

"Listen," said the editor, "we'll put a brass plate on your chest, telling the whole story for posterity, names, dates and everything! We'll have a big dedication ceremony, we'll get the Mayor out in his silk hat, we'll have a picnic—beer—champagne—we'll do the thing grand while we're at it! We'll get you to rustle your leaves for the talkies! We'll have community singing. Declare a public holiday, get all the Service clubs, and the Chamber of Commerce, the Merchants' Association, the Smeed Improvement League, the Elks, the Moose, the Masons, the Odd Fellows, all the school children. We'll get the band out in their busbies—both bands, by golly!—the Salvation Army will want to come in on the celebration—and have a bang-up parade—flags, banners, floats, cars buried in flowers. We'll have the post office boys march with a big wreath——"

"What's the wreath for?" John Gwilt asked, uneasily.

"For you, of course. You're the hero, the guest of honor."

"But I won't be—dead."

The editor rubbed his chin. "Well," he compromised, "we won't have a wreath if you feel that way about it. I guess we can think of something else. Drape you in bunting, or ribbon, or something."

Perhaps Fred Staines's raillery about maypoles still pricked, perhaps it was because he was at bottom a modest man—the Christmas party would have been more or less a family affair—at any rate. John Gwilt felt a little uncomfortable. "Can't you just leave me as I am? Won't the brass plate be enough without all that fuss?"

"Well, I tell you, we got to do the thing in style, you know." Mr. Hoop rubbed his chin and chewed on the remains of his cigar. "Hmn. Let me see now." He smirked and nodded his approval of the idea that came to him. "We'll have a picked

chorus of high school girls, all in white, singing Joyce Kilmer's poem about trees——"

Mr. Gwilt blinked desperately and said, "No!"

"No?"

"No! I don't care for that poem." John Gwilt shut his lips and stiffened his neck in obstinacy.

Hoop was confounded. "You don't like it?" He took the cigar out of his mouth to gesture and recite:

*"I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree . . ."*

"It's too personal," said John Gwilt.

"Speaking as a tree, you don't like it?"

"It's immodest," said John Gwilt firmly.

"Lord, what a story!" the editor exclaimed under his breath.

SMEED'S MAN-TREE

DEBUNKS KILMER

I'll hold that, of course, until things get warmed up. *Trees* is the nation's pet poem. I'll have them talking about Smeed from Cape Cod to San Diego!

"It's embarrassing," John Gwilt was saying. He would not admit, even to himself, his secret qualm about the defeatism in the last line of the poem.

"You're a hard man to please," said the editor, "but I suppose we'll have to humor you. You're a sort of a—virtuoso." Mentally he reserved his plan: when John Gwilt was actually a tree, there was very little he could do by way of protest, after all. He would stand in the centre of the ceremony, and if he didn't care for it—well, he might heave his branches about, but what difference would that make? The town was not to be deprived of its red letter day because the guest of honor was inclined to be temperamental.

Although the rain had subsided, the sky was still overcast and the morning was gray and chilly. Feeling the damp in his bones, John Gwilt shuddered and stretched.

"You'll have to wait for warmer weather."

"Oh, don't you worry, Mr. Gwilt; it'll take some time to get this thing into shape."

"You can't very well have the celebration until—until the metamorphosis has taken place," said John Gwilt whimsically.

"I'll say we can't! That's your job; we're depending on you. Our job is to get a fund to buy this property. You own it, don't you?"

Mr. Gwilt nodded.

"Wouldn't care to donate it to the town, would you?"

"Well," said Mr. Gwilt, doubtfully, "I have to think of my wife."

"Quite right, quite right. We'll buy it and make it a public square. Tear down the house." The editor rubbed his chin. "And we've got to have more room than this one small lot. May have to acquire two or three adjoining." He made gestures of demolition toward the houses of Fred Staines and Bill Dogan. "Pretty narrow, as it is. Yes, we'll have to do that, all right. It'll take two or three months, getting the money and making all the improvements. You'll be the central tree, of course, but we'll have to plant shrubs—lilacs and things—and lay out nice green lawns and flower beds. We might get the Rotary Club to put in a fountain. By golly, the more I think of the idea, the better I like it! Smeed needs something like this! I'll knock off an editorial on Breathing Spaces for the Growing City."

Mr. Gwilt glowed with pride to imagine himself the centre of all these public improvements.

"Here is the wedding picture, John," interpolated Jane, who had been listening patiently, anxiously, proudly, for some time.

Mr. Hoop reached out and took it. "Thanks," said he. "Ah, fine! Just the thing!" He smacked his lips over the tortured couple in the photographer's studio. Mrs. Gwilt was in white, in a dress that looked as if it had been borrowed for the wedding; she held the bouquet self-consciously, paralyzed by the realization that a girl had flowers only twice in her life, when

she was married and when she was buried, or as if they were property flowers, made of wax, thrust into her hands by a much-too-smiling photographer; and she held her head a little to one side and exhibited a strained, half-frightened smile, because the photographer rallied her and told her that all his brides smiled for him. Yet the delicate white ripple of the veil over her brow, and the hair escaping it in small curls, and her very awkwardness, made her appealingly pretty.

Perhaps if John Gwilt had taken the photograph from the editor's hand and had looked again at his young bride, he might have called for the spade and dug himself up, even if he had sprouted a root or two, and returned gladly to his bed and board and his daily round. Perhaps Mrs. Gwilt hoped that the photograph would restore him to his senses before it was too late, but John felt a little embarrassed, as a man does on being reminded of past foolishness—he was in the photograph, too.

"Maybe it would be better if you didn't print it, Mr. Hoop," he suggested diffidently. "It's rather personal, you know."

Out of the corner of his eye he had glimpsed the stiff attitudes of the bride and bridegroom and he blushed to remember himself as an extremely proper young man, slightly pompous and rhetorical, with thick, wavy hair and sideburns, and his coat buttoned up almost to his high, strangling collar. He was a trifle ashamed now of the self-confident way he stood, with one elbow poked out at an angle, and the way he held the bowler hat; ashamed of the bowler hat itself, and of the smirk of triumph—satisfaction, at any rate—on his face, and of the white carnation in his lapel. All this aplomb was humiliating to a man of meditative complexion who was about to transform himself into a stately tree.

The editor insisted that he take the photograph and as he spoke put it in his breast pocket. "You're like royalty, now; you're a celebrity, and you have no private life."

Poor Mr. Gwilt could only be relieved that Jane had not brought out the photograph which betrayed him as an infant

sprawling nakedly on a sheepskin, with his face screwed up to blubber.

"You will let me have it back?" implored Mrs. Gwilt, not without a tear.

"Oh yes, ma'am, certainly," Mr. Hoop promised. "Don't you worry about that. We'll take good care of it. And you'll have a new clipping for your scrapbook. And, believe me, Mrs. Gwilt, when this story gets going, you'll need a dozen scrapbooks!"

He took his leave and Mr. and Mrs. Gwilt stood looking at each other.

Jane sighed and gazed mournfully at her husband. "John—wouldn't you change your mind, John?"

But John was determined, if only to save his face, to go through with it.

"It's too late," said John.

"Then it *has* started? You feel something? You said—but I don't see——"

"Well," said John, "it may only be the cold, but I do feel a little stiffening in the legs."

"Will your legs grow together?" asked Jane.

"What do you expect? I'll have a trunk, like all the other trees."

Jane sighed.

"When I am a tree, I shall no longer be a man," said John Gwilt, more harshly than was, perhaps, necessary. This may have been because he was stoically disciplining himself.

Jane Gwilt knew little about the life of trees; they seemed so remote from one another, so self-sufficient, that a woman could hardly be expected to understand them or sympathize with them. Yet they flourished. She could not help thinking of mermaids. She had often wondered about mermaids and how it was possible for them to have their cold, slippery, briny babies, and she concluded that mer-babies were born like

fishes, however that was—were they hatched out of eggs? Of course Jane could never give utterance to such indelicate thoughts and she could never in this world hint to John that, as a wife, she thought there was more comfort in a two-legged man than in a tree, be it ever so majestic.

"I suppose you would like some lunch," she said apathetically.

"Well, my dear, for the most part, my system is still human."

"I think a bowl of soup would do you good. Your cold is getting worse."

His head was indeed stuffed and his eyes watered continually and he was obliged to resort to his handkerchief a good deal.

"It's only eleven," he said. He held his watch to his ear. It was ticking, but he wound it to make sure. "A bowl of soup wouldn't do any harm, anyway," he agreed, "liquid diet," and the faithful wife went into the kitchen.

John Gwilt stretched, did his best to breathe deeply, counting six in and eight out, snuffled, blew his nose, and began willing again. He ignored the two women, all that was left of the crowd, who stood looking over the fence and making remarks to each other.

"It's clearing up," he said cheerfully when Jane brought the bowl of steaming soup. The gray wool of the sky had been pulled aside and a convalescent sun poked its head out of the rift, as from the folds of a blanket, and was scattering a feeble light over the town of Smeed, making John Gwilt's bald head glow ruddily and showing up the dark stubble on his cheeks. His wife, thin and straight in her brown raincoat, stood watching as he eagerly spooned the soup.

"Would you like anything else?" she asked, when he handed her the empty bowl. "I must get my shopping done. What do you fancy for lunch? A couple of sausages and some grilled tomatoes?" Perhaps the thought occurred to her that an appeal to the inner John Gwilt might be a way to steer him from his folly. She went on: "There's an R in the month. I could do up

a nice oyster stew. Or there's liver and onions, with thick, brown gravy. Or bacon and lima beans. Fresh asparagus is in, of course——"

"Why don't you get a chicken, Jane? This may be my last human meal. I may be past taking solids—even an hour from now. I don't know how quickly this thing works. After all, it's the first time I've done it."

Mrs. Gwilt looked at him dubiously.

"A little more sun and I'll be well away. I feel a warm tingle now. Sap's running!"

"That may be the soup."

"Well, Mrs. Gwilt, time will tell. You go and do your shopping. I must concentrate."

For the greater part of the hour before Mrs. Gwilt returned from the shops and brought out the card table and a plate of sizzling sausages and tomatoes, with substantial slices of bread and a pot of coffee, John leaned on his umbrella, alternately dozing and exerting his Will Power. The children came trooping home from school down the lane, and climbed on the fence, shouting and jeering, but Mr. Gwilt maintained his dignity by putting up his umbrella and holding it in front of his face. Naturally this was a signal for the boys to begin pelting him with mud. John Gwilt winced and sweated, but the umbrella saved him from damage.

The process of change is always an ordeal, he thought. They laughed at Galileo. They threw bricks at the first silk hat——Not that I blame them for that, mind you, he added honestly. . . . I suppose all the other reptiles hooted at the first lizard to transform himself into a bird—probably tore him to pieces. Ah, well, the pioneers always suffer. When I am completely a tree, I shall not be the victim of rude gibes.

Eventually the children went home to their lunches, and Mr. Gwilt was able to eat his sausages in peace.

"I admit I am fond of sausages," he said, with more banter than reproof in his voice, "nice, sleek, brown, well-seasoned sausages; but you didn't take me seriously about the chicken, Mrs. Gwilt. Perhaps you're saving it for tonight?"

Mrs. Gwilt explained that in view of the circumstances a chicken would have been an extravagance.

"A common murderer gets a grand dinner before he goes to his doom, and you begrudge your husband a simple drumstick."

John Gwilt may have meant to be droll but it was an unfortunate allusion.

"If you consider you are going to your doom, you have only yourself to thank," said his wife, a little grimly.

"Don't take me up so seriously!" John hastened to exclaim. "I don't mean it that way."

"Well, didn't you say that you might be past solids before the chicken was out of the oven? Could you expect me to spend money on a chicken that you couldn't eat? Money will be scarce enough," Jane said, a little bitterly.

"All right," said John Gwilt, chastened.

"I shall soon be taking nourishment through my roots," he remarked, as he wiped his plate with a crust of bread, and Mrs. Gwilt was more cast down than ever, as if it were a reflection on her faithful years in the kitchen.

"Would you care to pass the time with a game of solitaire?" she asked unhappily. "Shall I leave the table and bring the cards?"

"No," was the firm answer.

"Would you like a book?"

"No," replied John Gwilt. "I must concentrate on my metamorphosis. Bring me the *Sun* when it comes."

She left him and he belched and remembered his lunch and fell to wondering about the nourishment of trees, whether there would be any taste to his food, or whether he would be unconscious of it, as a man is unconscious of the blood in his veins; whether the rain on his leaves would be like salt on the tongue, or would sting and burn, or would strike chill.

He could not go far afield in these speculations for, as he now regretted, the diet of trees was a phase of the subject he had not sufficiently studied. He felt that when the time came he would instinctively do the right thing.

John Gwilt blew his nose and as he stowed away his handkerchief in his pocket his fingers encountered a ring of keys and the keys set him off on a long exploration into possessions. The keys prompted him to think of locks, and the locks, of doors, and from doors he slid swiftly to windows and walls, floors, ceilings, roofs—houses and all that was packed into them. He began by attempting a catalogue of his own few belongings, but one thing reminded him of another so precipitously that soon his mind was in a turmoil and the whole confusion of the world—property, impedimenta, appurtenances, appendages, paraphernalia, goods, chattels, tackle, gear, baggage, furniture, harness, trappings, trinkets and gee-gaws—tumbled about his ears as if the world had been blown sky-high and was raining down upon him in bricks and sticks and stones and plaster, and splintered steel and shattered glass. He gulped with horror and, half cringing, stole a look at the sky; then he straightened his back and fetched a deep breath and was thankful that he had chosen to set himself free.

I have thrown off the world, he thought, as I used to throw off my clothes when we played hookey from school and went swimming in Miller's pond. He remembered with gratitude those young spring days when he plunged into the chill water, holding his nose, pretending he was a pearl diver in a limpid South Seas lagoon, and afterward stood on the sprouting grass, curling his toes, digging them into the turf, as he was doing now, and pulling his shirt over a wet, shivering body. Until today, life had never been so fresh and exciting.

Of course, the savages wear few clothes, he reminded himself, as he rigged up a picture of John Gwilt out of shoes and socks, underclothes, shirt, trousers, vest, jacket, collar, tie, braces, garters, laces, knots, buttons, studs, links, handkerchiefs, gloves, hat, overcoat, umbrella, galoshes, pipe, tobacco, matches, watch, chain, locket, car tickets, library card, spectacles, keys, coins: but the least complicated tribes deck themselves in beads and feathers and carry spears or bows and arrows, and go in and out of huts, and collect skulls and scalps and calabashes and wives.

There were other John Gwilts, too, he remembered: the John Gwilt of nightshirt; the John Gwilt of Lodge regalia—plumed hat, epaulettes, sash—but that had been a frivolity of his misspent youth.

How busy men are! thought John Gwilt: they are always doing and, to do, they need a multitude of *things* to help them, they need a multitude of things even to keep them alive. Men are workers and players, eaters and drinkers, goers, fighters, gatherers, movers; even when they are doing nothing, they need things to support them. Things! They are forever peering and prying, chopping, chipping, digging, scraping, hammering, shoving, piling, hoisting, tearing down, building up, making wheels go round. Things, things, things! Wheelbarrows and hearses. Howitzers, machine-guns, mousetraps, fly-swatters; crowns and sceptres, mitres and croziers, wigs and walking sticks; dogs on leashes, parrots in cages, goldfish in glass bowls, stuffed crocodiles, cases of coins and birds' eggs and butterflies, and toys from the tombs of Egypt—— They used to say that Lawyer Trout's father kept a stuffed horse in his bedroom. It had been his favorite and it had won all those ribbons that were pinned on his office walls. When he came home, reeking and reeling, as he often did, he used to climb up on the dead horse's back—he kept it saddled—and imagine he was vaulting hedges—whips and fishing rods, tennis racquets, snowshoes, balls, bats, clubs, sticks, corkscrews, dice, chips and chessmen, typewriters, adding machines, pens and pencils, books and playing cards, newspapers and tombstones.

What a clutter the human race drags around with it, from swaddling clothes to shroud, from cradle to coffin! And when the dead come back, they make tables dance and ring bells and send hats flying and scribble with pencils news about spirits smoking heavenly cigars, or push little wooden things around boards with numbers and letters printed on them. Numbers and letters, syllables and phrases, words and sentences, paragraphs and chapters, talk, talk, talk! letters and postal cards, and magazines and newspapers and books and

sermons and speeches, and telephones and telegrams and phonographs and radios and talkies, jabber, jabber, jabber, din, din, din! My God, thought John Gwilt, what a relief to be a quiet tree after all that uproar!

Almost the whole of human life is wasted on desiring and coveting, envying and hungering and getting, and holding on to the rubbish when it is collected, and fighting for it, killing for it—how insane! How infinitely superior, thought John Gwilt, are the quiet trees, who know nothing of greed, who stand where they are rooted and feed on the earth and air, the sun and the rain, who neither hunt nor kill, sow nor reap, hunger nor envy.

Man is man, thought John Gwilt. Even the greatest world renouncers are imprisoned in their strange, fragile spread-eagle shapes, arms and legs, needs and fears and jealousies. Even Ghandi, he thought, has his goat and his spinning wheel and wears spectacles. The most abstract philosopher, though he hide his shivering bones in nothing better than a hole, must have shelter; even if he stretch out naked on a bed of spikes, abhorring the flesh, or mortifying it with rods and scorpions, he must depend on *things*. Mahatma Ghandi, wearing nothing but a clout around his loins, eating a little fruit, and drinking a little milk, sleeping on the earth, comes as close as it is possible for any human being to come to the life of the trees. Yet for all this, and in spite of his ideal of the passive life, Ghandi restlessly jerks from place to place, from crowd to crowd, stirring up turmoil, as active as yeast.

It is impossible, reflected John Gwilt, to be a half-tree: how much better to be a full-spreading, proud, complete tree than an emaciated man without teeth! He felt glad that he was courageous enough to go all the way, and he pitied Ghandi for his compromise with humanity.

Mr. Hoop was discreet. He spread the news across the front page of the *Sun* and illustrated it with an engraving, three

columns wide, from the wedding photograph, but he said nothing about the public park or the brass tablet, and instead of yielding to his first impulse and printing the heading:

FOOTWEARY LETTER CARRIER
TRANSFORMS SELF INTO TREE

he compromised:

FOOTWEARY LETTER CARRIER
WOULD CHANGE SELF TO TREE

When the editor walked over to Gander Street to see how it fared with his protégé, he congratulated himself on his foresight. The erstwhile postman might make a laughing-stock of himself, but the *Sun* could not afford to risk ridicule. Yet it could not afford to miss a good story, however it turned out.

He found the poor man in a sorry plight. No sooner had the *Sun* appeared in the street than the whole town of Smeed, with one accord, on foot, on bicycles, on roller skates, in baby carriages, in automobiles, began rushing, as people rush to a conflagration, pell-mell, to the house of John Gwilt. When they discovered they could see nothing from the front and could not go through the house, which the distracted wife lost no time in locking and barricading, they rushed to the end of the street and poured into the lane. They pushed into Fred Staines's yard on the one side and into Bill Dogan's on the other, and some of the bolder spirits forced their way into Mr. Gwilt's own yard, to pester him with questions and pinch him to see if he were real. For a time, he kept his temper admirably, but at last he lost control of himself and began laying about him with his umbrella. This made the crowd laugh the more and one hoodlum snatched the umbrella out of his hands and began fencing with it, poking John Gwilt in the ribs and dancing back and poking him again and dodging round him. Quaking with terror, Jane watched from the bedroom window, too frantic

to think of calling the police. But Fred Staines and Bill Dogan both telephoned. The Chief came in person, big and black and threatening, and the crowd was driven, hooting, away.

"He's taking my umbrella!" cried John Gwilt, and when it was restored to him, he stood clinging to it, half sobbing and half whimpering with rage and fright. "Baboons, apes, jabbering chimpanzees! Thank God, I have enough sense to disown the whole mad tribe of them!" His teeth were chattering and he was trembling so violently that when Mrs. Gwilt ventured out the Chief ordered her to bring a chair and a drop of brandy.

"Don't you worry," the Chief said, patting him protectingly on the shoulder as he sank down on the chair. "I'll send Fink to patrol the place until midnight. Here," he said sympathetically, taking the tumbler from Jane's hand, "swallow this." John gulped and coughed and blinked and felt much better. "I don't blame a man, wanting to get off his feet," said the Chief.

"Call themselves the pride of Creation," John Gwilt muttered. His eyes flashed and he paid no attention to his wife, who was timidly touching his still quivering hand.

"If a man wants to plant himself in his own back yard," said the Chief to Hoop, in his bluff amiability, "it's all right with me. So long," he added heartily, "as he is alive when he does the planting. We draw the line at corpses in people's back yards. And so long," he went on impressively, "as he keeps the peace. I can't, myself, imagine anything more peaceful than a nice tree. Harry Oikle," he said in an aside to the editor, "wants to have him committed." He tapped his head. "But I say if he's crazy, he certainly isn't at large! Eh?" He raised his voice for the benefit of all and sundry, as if making a proclamation: "Now if Mr. Gwilt went to work and planted himself downtown, in front of Snooth's hardware, or at the door of the Baptist church, he might be blocking the traffic and disturbing the peace, but when he stays in his own back yard he's within his rights as a taxpayer and it's the gapers and gawkers who are making a nuisance of themselves. We'll keep them away,"

he said, turning to the dejected John Gwilt, "until you get well settled. I'll have a man here first thing in the morning. Good evening. Evening, Mrs. Gwilt. You can quote me, Hoop, that law and order will prevail." Promising to send Fink as soon as he had finished his supper, the Chief departed.

The editor examined John Gwilt with more disapproval than sympathy. "Not a sprout, yet," he said, turning his cigar with his tongue.

John scowled at him, half inclined to hold Hoop responsible for all his misery.

"I think Mr. Gwilt has been too worried and upset," said Jane.

John Gwilt sat glowering at the ground.

"How long is it going to take?" Hoop demanded.

Gwilt did not answer.

"The cold may be keeping him back, too," suggested Jane timidly. "I think he should give it up until the weather gets warmer, don't you, Mr. Hoop?" She began stroking her husband's head affectionately, but he threw off her hand. "Come into the house and get rid of his cold," she went on. "Get a good rest, take a tonic and build himself up for it."

John Gwilt muttered something under his breath and Hoop said encouragingly: "A good night's rest will work wonders. Can you sleep standing up?"

John Gwilt admitted sulkily that he did not sleep well in the perpendicular, and the editor suggested a sleeping draught.

"Will you get out of here and leave me alone?"

The editor shrugged. "O.K.," he said cheerfully. "Don't get too downhearted, old man, and we'll have that brass tablet on your chest yet. Gwilt Square will be the pride of Smeed, I'm telling you."

"Sleeping draughts!" John grumbled when Hoop had gone. "Is the man mad? What does he want to do, anyway, ruin my sap?"

Jane took special pains with her husband's supper, almost wishing she had got the chicken, but John was too agitated to eat, too feverish with indignation and cold, too weary in every

bone and muscle. He was too depressed to notice that Fred Staines and Bill Dogan, annoyed because their young gardens had been trampled, looked over the fence at him in hostility; he sat with his face buried in his hands and did not even see Fink patrolling up and down and keeping the townspeople moving along the lane. Jane brought out a chair and sat beside him for a while, but she did not stay long, for the evening was damp and chilly and John was unresponsive.

"Good night, John," she said.

"Good night," said John, almost bitterly. He looked up and sighed wearily. "You'd better take the chair."

"Oh, no, John!" she cried. "You just sit there and rest. You must be worn out."

But John Gwilt was obstinate. He rose and said: "Take it. Do you think that gang of hoodlums can divert me from my purpose? I'm going to put them all to shame."

Jane shook her head sadly. "Good night, then," she sighed. Fink carried the chairs to the kitchen for her and then returned and stood looking at John, as if he expected to catch him suddenly bursting into leaf. While he was on duty, he sauntered into the yard several times, but he was no hand at conversation and John had nothing to say.

Darkness came as a great relief. John Gwilt was glad when Jane brought him a glass of hot lemonade and some aspirin and tucked the blanket around his shoulders and kissed him and went off, forlorn, to bed; he was glad to hear the Staineses come in from the movies and to see Fred put the car away and turn out the lights; glad when Fink threw the flashlight ray in his eyes and said he was through for the night. Under cover of darkness, he felt safe; and he was able, at last, to make himself comfortable.

Night gathered quietly and protectingly around John Gwilt. He was too weary to exert his will, so he listened absently to the *bong, bong, bong, bong* of the Town Hall clock and to the lonely *whoo-whoooo* of the trains, shivered and dozed and dreamed. Cold and hunger and a surge of utter helplessness and loneliness almost drove him into a panic and several times

he was on the verge of uprooting himself and stumbling into the house, defeated.

But resentment against the human race burned in him like a hot coal and kept him steadfast. "I will turn into the dread Upas Tree," he told himself savagely. "I will destroy the whole town of Smeed with my fumes. Not a man, nor a woman, nor a child, nor a cat, nor a mouse, nor a blade of grass, shall be left alive. I will shoot up into the air, a great white pillar, and I will fork out my branches like lightning and shake my wicked leaves, and the whole town shall fall down dead. No matter what they are doing, they shall die; let them be walking in the street, or reading the newspapers, or laughing in the movies, or eating ice cream, or digging in their gardens, or taking baths, or saying their prayers; no matter: nothing shall save them. They shall look up suddenly, surprised, and say, 'What is that strange smell?' and gasp and shudder and collapse, and that will be the end of them. Smeed will lie dead about my roots and it will have brought down its own doom upon it."

John shuddered with mingled exultation and horror at his terrible vision and then he was heartily ashamed of himself. Much as he had been tried by mankind, John Gwilt was far too tenderhearted to harbor for long such gloatings of revenge. "It's the man in me," he murmured. This was the last flare-up of his anger, he was ashamed and, as he began to simmer down, he steadied himself by naming over in his mind all the trees he had ever seen or read about, and wondering which he would turn out to be.

The common trees he dismissed quickly, for he had a romantic as well as a contemplative disposition—ash, maple, elm, poplar, cottonwood, aspen, willow, sycamore, fir, pine, hemlock, tamarac, oak, basswood, birch, hickory, walnut, chestnut, rowan—beautiful as they might be—and he gave himself up to the luxury of imagining himself first of all an enormous spreading cedar and then a tragic cypress. But he rejected both cypress and cedar, and with them the twisted, sinister yew, and the olive—he did not care for olives and he

could not justify himself producing them. Perhaps, he thought—it may have been because of his cold—I will be a tall eucalyptus, fragrant on rainy nights; or a catalpa, with blowsy white flowers and broad leaves and curious, long beans; or a locust tree bearing the bread that nourished Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness; or an acacia; or a—no, neither oleander nor magnolia: they are too effeminate. I might be a handsome Lombardy poplar, shimmering like sequins in the sun, but I suppose that is effeminate, too, like a fancy-dress ball.

Suddenly, cinnamon, nutmeg, almond, fig and date palm sprang into his mind all at once and he smacked his lips as if he could taste his own spice and fruit. But he knew them as tastes and smells, and he was not quite sure of their shapes, so he reluctantly abandoned them and conjured up pictures of more familiar fruit trees.

I suppose I am hard to please, he said to himself, but I am afraid I can see no gratification in being an apple, a pear, a plum, or a cherry tree, or even a peach, or an orange, or a lemon, or a banana. Strictly speaking, the banana is not a tree at all, of course. I wonder if the guava is a tree or a bush? Bush, I think. But the mango is a tree, and so is the pawpaw—*papaia*, they call it in the Hawaiian Islands. Then there is the breadfruit, and the pandanus palm that is propped up with stilts, and the ironwood, and the kauri, and the fern trees, and the teak, the mahogany, the cork, and the rubber——

My God! groaned John Gwilt, how can I ever make up my mind? I have read too much. I should have said: "I will be a maple," and let it go at that. But that would be too easy. It would be more worthy of John Gwilt to turn into something difficult to achieve. Like the pomegranate! How strange and exciting, to see a pomegranate tree in a back yard in Smeed! Or a cocoanut! Imagine a slender cocoanut tree skyrocketing over the rooftops of Gander Street! The town would stare in amazement, people would flock from all parts of the country to gaze up at my green fronds. Yes, he reflected, a little damp-

ened, as he remembered what had happened to him a few hours before: they would flock; and I suppose the boys would play Tarzan of the Apes and shin up after my cocoanuts.

If I had money enough to carry me to Prester John's land, thought John Gwilt, I'd plant myself in his wilderness, a tree of the sun, or a moon tree, and no man dare molest me, for fear of dragons and crocodiles; and milk-white unicorns would sharpen their horns against my trunk, and sky-blue elephants would stand munching in the shade of my broad leaves. He sighed, knowing full well that he must stay in Smeed, and wondered if he might be a little intimidating without being malevolent: a holly tree, perhaps.

But you never know, I might turn out to be something quite strange—I might have no say in the matter at all—like a gingko, or a mandragora. He hesitated. Not too strange, I hope. It's the mandragora—or is it the mangrove?—that stands kneedeep in the stinking swamps, dragging its aerial roots in the mud and slime, half smothered in moss and infested with bats, myriads of furry bats hanging head downward in the branches and suddenly rising in furry clouds, blind and squealing. John Gwilt shuddered. Thank God, there is no such obscene swamp in the whole of Smeed! That's one thing I will say in its favor. He felt no better about the imba-uba of South America and the polygonums, riddled with the nests of wild bees and ants. Somewhere or other, he had read of a prickly, peppery tree called *xanthoxylum* and the name fascinated him, but he was afraid that no one in Smeed, not even Editor Hoop, would know what to call him. Would Hoop know the ylang-ylang if he saw it? Would he recognize the tall trunk and the showers of greenish yellow blossoms drenching the neighborhood in fragrance? Ylang-ylang! It sounded like a Chinese gong.

"I'd laugh," said John Gwilt, stretching out his arms and talking to the sky, "if I turned into a banyan!" He fancied himself thronging the whole yard with his innumerable branches and trunks, like one of those many-limbed Hindoo gods. "I might spread and spread," he reflected, "and crowd out the

house, and crowd out Fred Staines's and Bill Dogan's houses!" He had some idea in his mind of great irresistible roots growing and pushing like a slow earthquake, burrowing in the ground and cracking the foundations of the houses, bringing down the fences; and of branches elbowing and shouldering, shoving the uprooted houses into the street and tossing the garages into the lane. "They'd have to give me plenty of breathing space if I was a banyan tree!" he told the sky. But he decided that the town would not appreciate such an importunate plant. The Chief of Police might even consider it was disturbing the peace.

The same might be said of the baobab. All his life, John Gwilt had dreamed of going to Abyssinia, for no other reason than to gaze on the mystery and majesty of the baobab. Planted in John Gwilt's back yard, the baobab would spread itself in a massive mountain of wood, over John Gwilt's own lot, over Staines's, over Dogan's, over Smith's, next to Dogan's, and the field next to that again, and over the lot the other side of Staines—old man Moby's; reaching into the street and across it, and into the lane and across it, claiming land on both sides. It would demolish the houses and the fences, the garages and the gardens; cut off the traffic through Gander Street, knock down the poles and snap the telephone and light wires. It would be worse than the banyan: it would be nothing less than an insurrection.

It would be bigger, John Gwilt thought, than the post office; indeed, it would be as big as the Washington Hotel. "I have no right," he murmured in awe, "even if they did make me a public monument."

At the same time, he was much too reverent of the tree to wish that he might transform himself into a baobab. Into *a* baobab? He believed that it was The Baobab: that there was only one in the world.

"I wish I could get to sleep," he said to himself, as he hunched his aching shoulders and relaxed in a heavy sigh. "Or I wish something would happen." He moved his toes in the earth, but they seemed to be no longer than usual. He ran his thumbs over the tips of his fingers, but there was no change:

they did not feel any more tender. He sighed again, pulled the damp blanket closely about his body and stared straight ahead into the dark.

"I must get down to business," he was saying, when a faint sound against the quietness of the night made him hold his breath. He listened intently and threw back his head to look up into the sky. It came again, a faint, far-distant honking, and John Gwilt could just make out the two thin lines—were they there, or did he imagine them?—joined together in a V, passing swiftly, high up against the stars. The wild geese were going north. John Gwilt trembled and the tears welled into his eyes. As he watched them melt into the sky, he almost wished that he had chosen to be a bird.

"Spring has come," he said aloud, with a good deal of feeling, as if he were reciting a poem. He blinked and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "I must be part of it. I must hurry and make up my mind."

He breathed deeply, squinted at the stars and listened, with the hope of discovering another flight of geese. But at that moment there came to his mind an image of the giant sequoia.

"Ah," sighed John Gwilt, with great satisfaction, as if the matter were already settled, "of all trees, perhaps I should choose to be the sequoia. Like the baobab, it is ancient, immortal. I should live forever, in splendid tranquillity. Why, there are sequoias flourishing today that were old when Julius Caesar was playing leapfrog, or whatever it was the little Roman boys played."

It would not matter, he told himself, what happened to Gander Street. They could build factories or railway stations and send the dwellings in retreat farther and farther into the hills, but they would not dare destroy the giant sequoia. They would be proud of John Gwilt, the giant sequoia, and, even as Caleb Hoop predicted, keep a quiet sanctuary about him, and his vast bulk would go towering up and up until it overtopped the town and became a famous landmark. John Gwilt's story would be told from generation to generation and he would outlast the generations: he would be standing stalwart and

serene when Smeed, grown from a town into a great city, was lying in ruins at his roots; when the whole world, and the whole race of mankind, was on the wind in dust and ashes.

Perhaps, thought John Gwilt, it would be wise to concentrate on being a sequoia and not just any tree. I might easily turn into some scrubby little maple and be betrayed. A giant sequoia they could not intimidate. Man will respect size, if nothing else.

He remembered the shabby little tree he had discovered only last spring, crowded, stifled by the pickle factory and the soap works, driven into a corner to die. In the midst of smoke and grime and noisome vapors, it was putting forth feeble green leaves, but not in song, leaves that were rather faint mumblings, broken notes, wretched memories of springs and summers long gone by, the mumblings of a tree in its dotage. As John Gwilt stood shaking his head and pitying the poor creature, Miss Estelle Benbow, the town authoress, came by and paused to see what held the postman.

"Ah, the poor little tree!" she cried. "What a brave show."

John Gwilt looked at her pink cheeks and the white curls under her wide hat, at her bracelets and rings, and said, rudely: "Brave show, nothing! It's just a habit."

Miss Benbow pouted. "You have no fine feelings, postman."

"I tell you the tree knows no better," said John Gwilt. "It is being pitiable and foolish. I'd rather see it dead."

He marched off, leaving Miss Benbow gasping. But she wrote some verses about the brave little tree singing its cheery song and they were printed in the *Sun*.

"People who write verses about trees should be clapped in the penitentiary," said John Gwilt sourly. "I hope she doesn't put me into a poem." He stiffened with indignation. "I must never allow myself to be dragged into the humiliation that tree suffered."

John Gwilt began to wonder if he had been foolish to plant himself in his own back yard, foolish to trust even the sanguine schemes of Caleb Hoop. Might it not have been better if he had gone out into the hills where the trees led happier lives, or

down to the sea? What a joy it would be to stand beside the ocean, one with the eternity of the water and the wind!

He fell to thinking about the old square down by the railroad track and half wished he had gone there to keep the man in bloomers company. The man in bloomers was a statue, turned quite green and sadly blotched by Time's discourtesies, but he stood aloft, fixed in a swagger of imperturbability: he was even debonair, in his baggy bloomers and his hip boots, with his wide-brimmed hat flung aslant across his brow, and carrying his sword as if he were cutting his way through the treetops; debonair, though on gray days he smouldered with a livid phosphorescence, like a figure from the Day of Judgment. He was poised on a sort of box above a high swerving arch which was supported by four fluted pilasters, iron, but painted mahogany: from each pilaster, around the basin they straddled, ran a railing like a lead pipe issuing from the jaws of eight small lions' heads. They were all born in the same mould, those lions, all alike in their cast-iron consternation as they fruitlessly spewed the pipe from mouth to mouth. Once, a fountain had spurted under the statue's feet but now the basin was choked with dead leaves. The statue knew nothing of his lions, nor of the inscription on his box; all he knew was that he was pressing toward the towers of the Catholic church, with his sword heroically slashing through the treetops; why, he knew not, unless he thought he was rushing to save the church from the Indians. That he came no nearer seemed to disturb him not a whit, no more than he was disarranged by the collapse of the fashionable terrace on his left into a cheap and unsavory boarding house and the coming of the Chinese laundry and the Negro barber shop to the row on his right. Perhaps the square had never existed for him, even in its heyday; perhaps he was lost in his quixotic dreams. Years ago, the railway stole in behind his back and began a contemptuous campaign of smoking him out, as the despised ambassador of a silly, romantic age—swords and hip boots! His indifference was sublime.

John Gwilt had a great affection for the shabby old square and he loved the man in bloomers, if for no other reason than

that he was lost; lost, out of place and out of Time, forever advancing, with his brave, foolish sword, and forever not arriving; so deeply hidden in his dream of beauty and heroism that he could never know how absurd he was.

Perhaps I should have gone and planted myself beside him, thought John Gwilt. It is a public square already and will not likely be disturbed. I might have got to know him better; he might have told me his story; yet I am afraid nothing would turn his eyes away from the quest: he might only want to cut me down. I am sure, thought John Gwilt, he has never seen the Negro children playing on the grass, or the old railway veterans sitting stiffly on the green benches and gossiping about the days of links and pins, when the men had to run along the tops of freight cars, and when, as they say, the old girls used to gobble up the wood. He has certainly never seen the crossing watchman wave his red flag, nor the slanting arms of the gates go down; and if he has heard the *din din din din* of the crossing bell, he has never turned his head; he has never known what it meant; he pays no attention to the trains; he stands with his back to them; he does not even know he is in Smeed, or where he is, or in what century.

Yet I may be better off where I am. The square will grow dingier and dingier, that's sure. It was forlorn enough in winter, he remembered, when the trees were bare and the veterans were indoors dying. The square was cut into segments by two diagonal paths and the monument stood in the centre, where they crossed: the forsaken benches were all but buried in filthy snow and they seemed to go swirling endlessly around the statue, caught in some turgid vortex.

I should be asleep, but I should dream about it; and I am not sure that I could put up with being so close to the trains, chuffing and rumbling at all hours of the day and night, hoo-hooing and ding-donging, and belching out their black smoke. I'd like an outlook a little more cheerful than those drab red brick terraces; thinking of their past dignity would only make them seem more dismal. And I don't believe I care for willows. They're all willows in that square and I might have to

follow suit. Of course, a tree is a tree, but some I like better than others and the willow always struck me as insipid: its foliage in spring is like a sort of delicate diarrhoea.

No, the square by the railroad track, man in bloomers or no man in bloomers, would have been a mistake.

Fresh qualms now assailed Mr. Gwilt. Was it too much to expect that a sequoia would flourish in Smeed? He realized now how foolish had been his dreams of shooting up into a lofty cocoanut tree or wriggling and pushing into a banyan. One of Smeed's winters, with its shrill winds and drifting snows, would be enough to annihilate anything as fragile as a green palm. Was the sequoia, for all its size, more robust? It belonged to a warmer climate. And he could not be sure that the soil of Gander Street, or of any street in Smeed, was rich enough to nourish a sequoia. He had a notion that the soil was largely responsible for the tree: he might have been wrong, but he could never shake off the fancy that the copper beech, for example, drew a sinister blood from the earth, as if it were fed by the bodies of murdered men. What was in the soil of John Gwilt's back yard? Could there possibly be the makings of a sequoia?

Poor John Gwilt fell into despair and tried to haul himself out by saying that he could only try and by keeping his mind on the memory of a photograph he had seen in the *National Geographic Magazine*, the colored photograph of a sequoia in the Yosemite, superbly dwarfing a group of trail riders on horseback.

He was worn out, and he succumbed at last to dozing, and at last wandered into an uneasy sleep. Soon he discovered that he was a massive chestnut tree, alight with blossoms, great clusters of blossoms, every one a tingling, burning taper. There he stood on the hilltop, ablaze for all the world to see, and all the world was packed in a dense throng, looking at him, thousands and thousands of awe-struck faces, lit by the blossoms, gazing up at him. Suddenly the press divided, as if it had been cloven by a stroke of lightning, and a solemn procession moved through the channel: Mayor Hollyberry in his frock coat and

silk hat, and Editor Hoop with his cigar, and Postmaster Oikle, carrying a mailbag, John Gwilt's own bag, and the Chief of Police, and Fink, and Mrs. Gwilt. Jane was all in black, dressed like a bride, in a long trailing veil, but even the veil was black. The procession stopped and the Mayor took off his silk hat and handed it to Mrs. Gwilt, who put her bouquet in it and set it on the ground and said she was sorry but she must go and get a bowl of soup. The band, which seemed to be sitting in John Gwilt's branches, played a mighty flourish, as the circus band does when the star of the trapeze is turning somersaults. John Gwilt felt the blast through all his limbs and his blossoms shook violently. Then Editor Hoop took a large brass plate out of the mailbag and reached up to hold it against John's broad trunk while the Mayor, his forehead glistening with sweat, began driving in the screws. Every thrust of the screw-driver pierced John Gwilt with agony. He groaned and the band echoed his groans; he trembled and the crowd of people began to tremble. Suddenly everyone burst into shrieking laughter and John Gwilt discovered, to his horror, that he was no longer a tree but a little man standing stark naked on the hilltop, in front of a jeering multitude. He tried to turn but could not; he tried to run, but his feet were fast in the earth; he pulled and tugged until blood and sweat poured off him, but he could not budge; he shivered with cold and shame, though his chest burned; and the crowd swayed and rocked and jeered.

In the morning, Jane found her husband in very low estate. He rolled his eyes lugubriously at her and croaked, "Food, for God's sake!" in a voice so thick and hoarse that she could hardly distinguish the words. After a dish of porridge and great draughts of scalding coffee, he felt a little better, but confessed that he had a pain in the chest.

Jane was aghast. Her mouth dropped open and she uttered the dread word "Pneumonia!"

"John!" she cried, "I knew you'd get your death! I'll call Dr. Dwindle at once."

She started toward the house but John had enough spirit left to summon her back and catch her by the wrist and say, looking threateningly into her eyes: "You will do nothing of the sort."

Jane whimpered and implored but John was adamant. He did give her the satisfaction, however, of agreeing to wear a mustard plaster.

As she laid it against his chest and tied a string around it to keep it from sliding down, John Gwilt thought ironically of the brass tablet. He buttoned his shirt and waistcoat, saying he would soon be past these mortal frailties.

"But, John! There are no signs yet! It isn't going to work! You'll die out here on your feet from sheer pigheadedness. Please, please, for my sake, give it up. Let's go away somewhere for a holiday——"

"I will not give it up," said John Gwilt. "Listen, Jane," he added, a little more kindly, "I have to go through with it now. Can't you see how people would laugh? Besides, I've thrown up my job."

"You could get another. Something that would be easier on your feet."

"Jane Gwilt, I made up my mind I would be a tree, and a tree I intend to be."

Jane shook her head dolefully. "You will die before you get even a single leaf."

"Wait and see, my dear, wait and see."

John Gwilt spoke hopefully, but in his heart he was growing discouraged, and when Hoop's young assistant, Jasper Bone, arrived, grinning from ear to ear, he was almost ashamed to meet his gaze. The result of the interview was a facetious story in the *Sun* about the mustard plaster.

Jane tried to keep the paper from him, but John insisted on seeing it and was outraged. "I'll show them!" he exclaimed, grinding his teeth. "They'll laugh on the other side of their faces when I stand in dignity before them."

The nightmare troop of Smeedians, irresistibly drawn by the wretched figure of the little man leaning on his umbrella, was kept at a distance by the police; the sun shone and warmed his aching bones; so, save for his cold, and the gnawing doubt, and his chagrin at the *Sun*, and the visit of the Rev. Dr. Daniel Doody, John Gwilt had a fairly comfortable day.

"I know," Dr. Doody boomed, like a bell, "I know—"; what a sinful pleasure that man took in his voice!—"I know you seldom come to church, Mr. Gwilt, but your good wife does, and we still look upon you as a member of the congregation." He smiled blandly and wagged a fat white finger at the sinner. "Never a sheep strays, Mr. Gwilt, but we know where he wanders."

"Very considerate," said John Gwilt coldly.

"At a time like this," Dr. Doody boomed, "we must let bygones be bygones, grieved as we may have been at your—shall we say?—indifference." He paused for breath and effect. "May we not attempt—we cannot let you pursue this—shall we say?—folly, without making some effort to stay its headlong course?"

Jane, standing humbly by, wiped her eyes with her apron.

"My good man," said Dr. Doody, laying his hand on John's shoulder, "will you not abandon this—eh—madness?"

"It is not madness," said John Gwilt, puffing up his chest and stiffening his neck, "and I will not abandon it."

Dr. Doody shook his large head reproachfully. "For the sake of your dear wife and family, will you not yield to reason?"

John Gwilt felt the mustard plaster slipping but he put his hand to his breast and stood firm.

The Rev. Dr. Doody tried another tack. "Do you think, Mr. Gwilt, that what you are doing is right in the sight of the Lord?" He finished with a smack of the tongue and his features took on an expression of commanding sternness. "Are you not afraid of the consequences of such obstinacy, of such defiance, of such—must I say it?—of such utter depravity?"

"I am not afraid of your bogeymen!" cried John Gwilt,

blinking excitedly. "You may not know, Dr. Doody, but I have read a good deal. I am a pagan, a pre-Christian. If there is a god, and he has any sense, I am sure he would far rather have one self-respecting tree than a whole menagerie of jabbering chimpanzees."

Dr. Doody gasped and drew his head back as if he had been struck. He opened his mouth to speak, but John Gwilt gave him no opportunity.

"I suppose you know that trees were made before men? Your Bible will tell you that. Have you never heard of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death in the Garden of Eden? Have you never heard of Ygdrasil, which towers above the stars?"

"You are compounded of ignorance, Mr. Gwilt, ignorance and impudence," said Dr. Doody arrogantly, "or you would know that the tree is an inferior form of life. In spite of all his sins, man is the Lord of Creation——"

"Yes," said John Gwilt, holding himself erect, with one hand on his chest and one grasping the umbrella, and looking beyond the Rev. Dr. Doody, "man can talk platitudes. And he can run about on legs, here, there and everywhere. For what reason? Ants can do the same, and they have more legs. He has power, I will admit: the power of destruction. He can chop us down and saw us into lumber——" John Gwilt winced—"and he can invent guns to blow himself to pieces. But you can't tell me that makes him superior. No, Dr. Doody, a tree can never have any respect for a man. I tell you man is an impudent upstart. Trees were created before men and trees will flourish when the whole race of man has destroyed itself."

John Gwilt breathed heavily and his brow was wet; he pressed his hand against his chest and gasped, but his eyes snapped.

"You're quite the orator, Mr. Gwilt," Dr. Doody said, out of a twisted mouth. As a preacher, he resented being preached at by a layman, and his broad face was scarlet. He turned an outraged back on John Gwilt and faced the weeping Jane. "Mrs. Gwilt," he intoned, solemnly, holding his wrath in check, "either your husband is sunk in the depths of depravity or he

is a raving lunatic. I hope, for your sake, it is the latter. In either circumstance, there is nothing I can do to turn his steps from this rash course."

"He may be delirious," said Jane, in a stifled voice, "he has such a terrible cold."

"Reason with him, my dear woman, plead with him; there may yet be time to snatch him from perdition."

Without another look at the lost soul, he stamped solidly and haughtily out of the yard.

John Gwilt felt that he had won a triumphant victory. "Jane," he said, tenderly, "you mustn't listen to that old wind-bag. You're a musician. Don't you remember what Beethoven said? Well, Beethoven said he'd rather have a tree than a man, any day, and I think there's more weight in the words of a great genius like Beethoven than in the mouthings of a hundred puffed-up parsons like Dr. Daniel Doody. Cheer up, Jane, you'll be very proud and happy when you're able to come out in the afternoon and sit in the shade of my spreading branches."

Jane sniffed and said it would be a comfort.

"I'm sure I'd rather have you, my dear, than a blue elephant," he added thoughtfully.

When John Gwilt was finishing his supper, a sparrow lit on the table and then flew up and perched on his shoulder, winking its tail and cheeping into his ear.

"Why, look who's here!" cried John, hugely delighted. "Look who's here, Jane! It's a sign! He isn't afraid! He seems quite at home!"

Jane said dolefully that he was probably looking for a place to build a nest.

John picked up a piece of cake and crumbled it in his fingers. "Come, chuck, chuck!" he wheedled. He was overjoyed when the sparrow jumped into his hand and began pecking at the crumbs. "Knows me already!" cried John. "It's a sign, Jane! It's a sign!"

Jane shook her head and sniffed and began piling the dishes on the tray.

"Think of the birds coming to see me! Coming to live with me! I always liked the little fellows. Perhaps we can entice a pair of bluebirds, or an oriole! Jane, you'll have to get rid of Solomon: he'll scare all the birds away."

It was Jane's turn to take a firm stand. She had set the tray on the ground and was folding up the card table. Three of its legs pointed menacingly at John as she bridled and exclaimed: "I will do no such thing!" John was a little taken aback at her vehemence. "Nothing of the kind, you selfish man! I will not sit down and allow you to deprive me of every comfort. Get rid of Solomon! How dare you think of such a thing!"

"All right, my dear," John Gwilt said soothingly and resignedly, "as you say. I only thought you might like the odd oriole—something gay and pretty—in the garden. Better than a surly old tomcat. However," he added, not without malice, "if the town buys the place and turns it into a park, you'll have to move, anyway."

Jane was alarmed. She had not begun to think of such a contingency. "What am I going to do?" she protested. "Where am I going to live if they tear down the house?"

"You'll be better off than you ever were before, my dear. You'll have the money, and, after all, you wouldn't be able to look after this place by yourself."

"Whatever happens, I keep Solomon," was Jane's final word, as she marched into the house with the tray.

When she came back to get the table, she found her husband talking to Fred Staines.

"What's the matter with the old Will Power?" Fred Staines asked, with a friendly sneer.

Buoyed up by the visit from the sparrow, John Gwilt replied: "The Will Power's all right. Takes a little time, that's all."

"The only change I can see," said Fred Staines, his elbow on the fence, "is you've got yourself into a swell cold." John did not deign to answer. "And you've made a fine laughing stock of yourself."

"Time will tell who's the laughing stock, Fred Staines, you

or me," said John Gwilt placidly. "Long after you're lying horizontal in the ground, worn out by a life of senseless chasing after will-o-the-wisps, long after the Odd Fellows have put you away, and long after your granite headstone has tumbled down, I shall be standing upright, holding out my strong branches to the summer showers, or catching the sun on my glittering leaves."

Naturally, Fred Staines lost his temper. "You're crazy!" he shouted. "And furthermore, you're making a public nuisance of yourself, stuck up there like a scarecrow and attracting all the rubbernecks in the country. I'm not going to have them trampling down my garden, let me tell you! I won't stand for it!"

"I'm keeping to my own side of the fence," said John Gwilt, with dignity. "You keep to yours. I can't help it if those yahoos come trooping and whooping. I don't want them. I didn't advertise myself as an exhibition."

Jane could not forbear asking who had spread the news in the first place, telling it to every Tom, Dick and Harry who came into the barber shop. Whereupon Fred Staines threw up his hands and vanished.

With a fresh mustard plaster burning on his chest and his shoulders drooping under the blanket, with every bone and muscle aching, John Gwilt that night fell into an unquiet sleep. He dreamed that he was standing in the yard, talking to the Rev. Dr. Daniel Doody, when he suddenly heard an explosion like the sound of a gun, followed by a dreadful roar, like the roar of a terrific wind or a terrific fire. Aghast, he turned and saw that his own house was ablaze. The flames were leaping out of the windows and running up the blistering boards, and the roof was crowned with fire and smoke. He shrieked "Jane!" and started to run. But his feet were rooted in the earth. He tugged and pulled until the sweat poured from him, but the more he pulled the deeper his toes shoved themselves into the ground; they did not seem to belong to him at all; they resisted him, they pulled against him, savagely and with growing

strength. Then he realized that he was no longer a man but a tree. Yet he could see the dreadful conflagration, he could hear its roar, and he could feel the heat. His leaves began to shrivel and he strained his boughs in agony. Jane, he thought, is surely dead, burned to a cinder. But at that moment, he saw Jane spring out of the flames into the arms of the Rev. Dr. Doody. As they rolled over on the ground, the roof crashed in. John Gwilt sagged with relief. But Jane jumped up, frantically clutching Dr. Doody's coattails and screaming: "John's in there! John's in there! Save him! Save him!" Poor John Gwilt strained and stretched in his anxiety to tell her that he was alive, standing safe in the yard, but he could not utter a word, and he heard the parson tell Jane: "You have my deepest sympathy, but I am afraid it is as it should be. Your husband merited no better end."

John Gwilt woke with a violent start, to see his wife standing in front of him with a flashlight in one hand and a steaming glass of lemonade in the other. She wore rubbers on her bare feet and had thrown a raincoat over her nightgown; her hair was in curl papers.

With the glare of the light in his eyes, John was by no means certain, for a moment, whether he was awake or still dreaming, or whether his dream had been a reality.

"Drink this, John, dear," the apparition was saying. "It will do you good. How's your poor chest? I had a nightmare and woke up, and I just had to come out and see if you were all right."

John blinked at Jane and then turned his head to make sure that the house was still standing.

"Been dreaming, myself," he admitted. His hand trembled as he took the glass and began sipping the lemonade.

"How do you feel?"

"Just the same."

"How's the plaster?"

"Must be all right. It burns. This drink is good." He had been shaken by the dream and as he handed his wife the empty

glass, John Gwilt looked at her closely. For a moment he was perilously close to saying: "I give up, Jane. Help me out of this." He hesitated and felt an excitement in the pit of his stomach as a man does when he is faced with an important decision; his heart thumped. He opened his mouth to speak and shut it again and drew a deep breath. "Now go back to bed, Jane," he said at last. "Too cold out here for you. What time is it, anyway?"

Jane said it was only half past one and she would like to sit with him a while, she was so lonely; but he told her she needed her rest, and so did he, and she sighed and kissed him and padded off toward the house.

"Of course, anything might happen," said John to himself, as he reflected on his ugly dream. Pushing the blanket aside, he felt in his pocket for pipe and tobacco pouch. Maybe I shouldn't smoke, he thought; perhaps it was an omen that I'm going to fall asleep and set myself on fire. Nevertheless, he went on stuffing his pipe. You have to take these chances, he added, as he struck the match and puffed.

As he smoked, the horror of the dream died away and with it the memory of the jeering neighbors and the facetious young reporter who made vulgar jokes in the *Sun* about his mustard plaster, and even the irritation of the sanctimonious Dr. Doody. He slipped into a placid reverie.

Perhaps I have turned, he thought: I feel so peaceful, and not nearly so tired as I was. But he realized that this could not be, for he was smoking and he had never heard of a tree that smoked tobacco. Yes, he could feel the pipestem in his teeth and the smoke in his throat; he still had arms, and hands and fingers; he still had a stubbly chin that he could stroke; he could feel the cool air about his naked head; and, now that he came to think of it, he was still conscious of the mustard plaster burning on his chest. He moved his arms, he bent his knees, he twisted his neck. "Ah, well," he sighed, as he blew out a little cloud of smoke, "it takes time, takes time."

No doubt he should have been exerting his Will, but he was

content to smoke and muse. "Funny little fellow," he murmured, thinking genially of the sparrow. "I wonder if I shall be able to understand their language. She wouldn't put Solomon out of the road. Poor Jane, she has to have some pleasure, and she is fond of that old cat. I wonder why I never thought of suggesting that she metamorphosize with me. Hasn't enough W.P. I could have willed for the two of us, I suppose. We could have been like that old Greek couple, Philemon and Baucis. But she'd never do it, never in this wide world."

He imagined himself towering high above the rooftops, high above the telephone wires, his glorious green crown dominating Gander Street. Jane would be hard put to it to believe that this leafy magnificence was her husband; she would be awed, a little afraid, prouder of John than she had been at any time since the day she had met him at the picnic, many years ago, and he had impressed her with his wisdom and his vocabulary.

Now and again, on a drowsy summer afternoon, he would hear a child's *dee-deedle-dum-dum* coming through the parlor window, and he would hear the tap of Jane's pencil on the piano keys. He would watch his wife affectionately. He would preside over her goings and comings: see her lock the front door behind her as she went to church on Sunday mornings; see her, on week days, emerge with her market basket; see her going off for a ride in Fred Staines's motor car; try to catch what she was saying to Mrs. Staines over the fence. He would bear her no grudge if she tied the clothesline around his trunk and he would love to see her hanging out the wash, with clothespins in her mouth. He wondered whether the fluttering garments would stir any feelings within him. "You goose!" he would exclaim, when he saw her running out to save the clothes from a sudden shower: "I could have told you it would rain! You people have no weather sense at all!" But she would not hear him. It would make him happy to see her crouching over the garden plot and prodding the earth with the trowel, sifting in the seed and then shoving stakes through the colored envelopes and sticking them in the ground so that she could

distinguish carrots from cucumbers and nasturtiums from sweet peas. How lovingly he would watch the straggling rows of green shoots! though he would be irritated with Jane for not planting under a taut string.

I shall see her grow old, he thought complacently, though affectionately: poor Jane! and one day I shall see them carry her down the front steps in her coffin; and Dr. Doody will pray lugubrious prayers and say mournful things about her. Thank God! there is no coffin for me and I shall have no funeral. Perhaps, he reflected a little sadly, I shall never know what happens to her. When they tear down the house and lay out the sanctuary . . . I wonder if she will ever come to see me? I think I would rather just go on living with Jane, just the two of us. . . .

He switched his thoughts abruptly back to Solomon. "I hope he doesn't make a pest of himself," he said. "I'd love to have a few birds. Nice ones, like orioles, or those little nut-hatch fellows that creep up and down. My God! I hope the woodpeckers don't find me out! Much as I admire them. . . ." He nearly broke into a cold sweat at the thought. "However, perhaps when you're wood, you don't mind so much. But I'll have to speak to Jane about starlings; something will have to be done about the starlings: I can't stand their filthy habits."

He knocked his pipe out against his knee and put it back in his pocket. Yawning and stretching, he caught sight of the stars over the rooftops and stood for a long time gazing at them. "I'm going to see a lot of the stars from now on," he said, and he wished he had paid more attention to the sky maps Hoop's paper printed once a month.

All I know is the Big Dipper, he realized, with profound regret. I'm not even sure about the little one. Which is Orion, and where is Hercules with his club? I can't even tell Mars from Venus! Mars is red, of course. Well, no use regretting it now. I'll have to find out the shapes of the constellations for myself and think up my own stories and my own names for them. Why not? Why should the Greeks name everything, anyway? I'll have plenty of time, night after night.

The stars are better than music, he thought, for you can stare at them hour on hour, and they remain; while sound, rise it ever so piercingly, before you have grasped its pattern, is quickly hushed into a tremor, into silence, into nothing. Music shocks, seizes you and shakes you and drops you, bewildered and disappointed, but the stars, the stars remain.

He sighed. But have trees eyes? Of course. Maybe they are all eyes, every leaf is an eye as well as a tongue. He grinned at the fancy. We *must* see! Perhaps we see better than men. What a time I'm going to have, with the moon, and eclipses, and meteors!

I shall become familiar with the phases of the moon, thought John Gwilt, and study the changes of the Equinox. I shall grow weatherwise: the trees, like the birds, must be able to foresee the coming of winter.

I think I shall always love spring best, he mused. We are at our happiest then, after the long, frozen, naked winter, and before the full-blown summer. How miraculous we are! Whether it be a broken maple, half-strangled between a fence and a brick wall, or a magnificent colonnade of Lombardy poplars shielding a convent from the street, it is impossible, in the spring, to believe that the city can put forth trees: the city is so sterile in steel and stone and cement and hard-baked brick, and the trees are so frail: they touch the heart, they are so frail, sprouting up through the cracks in the brutal stones, and the light shines through them.

He fell to thinking of their shapes and colors: a haze of green, a splash of green, a spatter of red and gold against the wash of clouds, gray clouds, thinning away to white, dissolving into the luminous blue sky. The maples are pink and gold, he thought, and the elms are intricate webblings of twigs showing through a thin veil of green; the chestnuts unclench fat fists on thick black arms; out of the twisted thorns, the leaves burst in agony; and the birch trails her tatters, and the balm of Gilead, dripping with catkins and leaves like green glass, is a glittering chandelier. . . .

John Gwilt began to nod, his head fell forward on his breast and he dozed off, standing patiently in the midst of the sleeping town, alone under the farflung stars.

In the morning, he greeted Jane with a complacent smile, indeed, a knowing smile, and said "Good morning, my dear!" with such gaiety that it was a wonder she did not become suspicious at once.

But Jane was not good at reading smiles and she could not forbear murmuring, a trifle disparagingly, "Three nights and not a twig."

"You seem disappointed, my dear."

"Oh, John!" she cried remorsefully, "how can you say such a thing! I never wanted you to do this."

"Then why say 'Three nights and not a twig' in such a disgusted tone, my dear?"

"I just meant," said Jane, "that it should be enough to convince you that—it isn't going to work."

"Yes," John said cheerfully, "you are beginning to lose faith in me; like all the others. You're tired of waiting on me, bringing me my breakfast, and laying on the mustard plaster. Well, my dear, I don't blame you. It does get to be trying, especially with all the neighbors sneering and jeering."

"I don't begrudge you anything I do for you, John; you know that. I never did."

"Well, Jane, your troubles are over."

Jane's mouth and eyes popped open; she stepped back as if he had struck her. "You don't mean—you've—sprouted?"

"The metamorphosis has begun," said John Gwilt, with enormous satisfaction.

Perhaps Jane thought he looked too preposterous, standing there wrapped up in his blanket, with three days' growth of beard and a nose red with cold, and his bald head so damp and pink, and that bland, idiotic smile on his face. Perhaps she

simply did not wish to believe. She stared at him incredulously and began to reproach herself for not calling Dr. Dwindle earlier.

"It began with the feet," said John Gwilt happily. "I have no feet now, Jane. Roots. And what roots! They stretch out and out, deep and deep, far down into the dark earth. Oh what a satisfaction there is in strong deep roots! I feel so tremendously solid and secure! I feel immortal! Nothing can shake me, no wind can throw me down!"

Jane burst into tears and her husband drew her toward him and put his arms around her and comforted her.

"My legs have grown together," he said. "I am a tree to the waist. Look, my trousers have burst."

He drew the blanket aside and revealed his trunk. "Not as big around as it will be, of course, but feel it: isn't that satisfying?" he slapped the thigh that was now wood, covered with bark, and enjoyed the hardness of it.

Jane snuffled.

"I've lost my fatigue," he crowed. "I'll never walk again."

Jane sniffed.

"You'd better take these clothes to the house," said John Gwilt. "It won't be long now. There's no use splitting them all."

He took the blanket off, neatly folded it and handed it to his wife. Jacket and waistcoat followed, then he undid the buttons and slipped off his shirt. He piled all the garments and the cold mustard plaster into Jane's arms and bade her take them away, together with the broken trousers.

"What good are they to me?" she asked mournfully.

"Well," said John, "give them to Shuffling Sam, if you like. I'm through with them."

She stood looking at him so pensively that he grinned and chucked her under the chin. "Cheer up, Jane," he said. "No more socks to darn. No more buttons to sew on."

"That's one consolation," she sighed, trying to be bright. "I hope," she said, with sudden misgiving, "you won't expect me to keep your leaves sewed on?"

"When they come off, they come off," he assured her affably.

On her return, she asked him if he would like some breakfast.

"I think not, my dear. I am still half a man, but I have no stomach." He observed that he was suffering a little discomfort, just a slight uneasiness, as if his system were not quite used to the arboreal diet he was now drawing through his roots. "And I feel a little lightheaded," he added blithely.

So John Gwilt stood, in his back yard, the naked torso of a man down to his waist, and, below that, the solid trunk of a tree well-rooted in the ground, and Jane Gwilt stood looking at him disconsolately.

"I think I am branching!" said John Gwilt, with a smirk. "Don't my original arms look longer to you, Jane?" he inquired, with an edge of pride on his voice. "And look! I am in bud!"

As he spoke, the tips of his fingers burst into little green leaves.

"Oh dear! It's true, then!" cried Jane. "And now I am a Hindoo, married to a tree!"

She did not know what was required under the circumstances, so after fluttering about her husband, half hysterical, for a moment, she fled into the house to consult the Bible.

John was examining his young shoots with curiosity and affection, trying to decide what sort of tree he was, when Mr. Hoop arrived.

"Gosh all fish-hooks!" he roared, dropping the cigar out of his mouth in amazement. He shoved his hat to the back of his head as he rubbed his brow and stared at John Gwilt with popping eyes.

He recovered quickly and gulped. "Got a 'phone in the house?"

John smiled and nodded and the editor ran across the yard and pushed into Jane's kitchen without knocking.

It was not long before the photographer arrived and John Gwilt was smiling for the camera, extending his leafy fingers

on his chest, shaking hands with Mr. Hoop ("Don't bruise my leaves!" he cautioned. "They are very young and tender.") standing in an affectionate pose with red-eyed Jane, and with his arms spread out like branches.

All rancor against the human race had melted away from John Gwilt's heart and he looked upon the world, and the town of Smeed, with the benignity that a tree might be expected to bestow upon an inferior form of life. When the *Sun* appeared, emblazoning his strange history on the front page, with headlines, and with photographs of all the poses, the crowds that came to stare at him were so great that the fence was broken down and Chief Pettibone and Sergeant Fink were called upon to organize the people of Smeed into queues and keep them moving in a loop from the lane through the yard and out on the other side. Yesterday, the steady tramp, tramp, tramp of his neighbors filing past and gaping at him, the gawking and sniggering of some and the superstitious open-mouthed awe of others, would have driven him frantic, but today, half tree, he smiled and nodded and even uttered a few words to show that he was alive, and, indeed, enjoyed the reception. I have never had so much attention paid me in all my life, he thought happily.

At first, he was a little nervous about his young leaves and while he did not mind holding up his fingers, he steadfastly refused to shake hands. He did not like people pinching the human part of him, but he found that a kick did not hurt his trunk. On the whole, he escaped very well; the police were efficient, and Jane, standing on one side of him, and Hoop, on the other, kept the more boisterous of the jostling line within bounds.

"I will shake hands with *you*, Fred," said John Gwilt to his friend the barber. "We have always been good neighbors, even if you did think me a little queer——"

"Oh, no!" Fred Staines protested.

"Careful, Fred. Don't bruise my leaves."

"Good bye," said Fred, a little embarrassed. "Good luck, John."

"Will you do something for me?" John Gwilt asked benignly. "Promise me that when the weather is dry and you're out watering your garden, Fred, you'll turn the hose on me?"

"I couldn't do less for a friend," Fred Staines promised.

As the crowd passed, Mr. Hoop was busy estimating its numbers and dismally regretting that so much public interest was going to waste. If he stays as he is, thought Editor Hoop, I'll make myself his manager, put a tent over him and charge admission.

Half man and half tree! Have you seen him? Have you seen him? He's alive, alive, alive! Come on ovah! Come on ovah! Instructive! and entertaining! The chance of a lifetime here! Come on ovah! See the tree man! Half man and half tree here! The most stupendous! the most colossal! the most amazing; miracle ever beheld by the eyes of man! Have you seen him? Have you seen him?

I'll put a tent over him and have some banners painted, advertise him far and wide, all over the country, and *what a clean-up Caleb Hoop will make!*

But nothing came of his scheme for, next morning, when Jane Gwilt looked out of the bedroom window, she was confronted by a fully-grown sycamore, upright, symmetrical, beautifully branching, many times taller, many times more handsome than the little postman she had married and lived with so long. She ran down to the yard in her nightgown and threw her arms around his trunk and kissed his rough bark and wept, the while he stirred his branches and shook his young green leaves as if they were so many little bells.

Laura¹

BY SAKI

"You are not really dying, are you?" asked Amanda.

"I have the doctor's permission to live till Tuesday," said Laura.

"But today is Saturday; this is serious!" gasped Amanda.

"I don't know about it being serious; it is certainly Saturday," said Laura.

"Death is always serious," said Amanda.

"I never said I was going to die. I am presumably going to leave off being Laura, but I shall go on being something. An animal of some kind, I suppose. You see, when one hasn't been very good in the life one has just lived, one reincarnates in some lower organism. And I haven't been very good, when one comes to think of it. I've been petty and mean and vindic-

¹From *The Short Stories of Saki* (H. H. Munro), copyright, 1930, by The Viking Press, Inc., New York, and John Lane, The Bodley Head Limited, London.

tive and all that sort of thing when circumstances have seemed to warrant it."

"Circumstances never warrant that sort of thing," said Amanda hastily.

"If you don't mind my saying so," observed Laura, "Egbert is a circumstance that would warrant any amount of that sort of thing. You're married to him—that's different; you've sworn to love, honour, and endure him: I haven't."

"I don't see what's wrong with Egbert," protested Amanda.

"Oh, I daresay the wrongness has been on my part," admitted Laura dispassionately; "he has merely been the extenuating circumstance. He made a thin, peevish kind of fuss, for instance, when I took the collie puppies from the farm out for a run the other day."

"They chased his young broods of speckled Sussex and drove two sitting hens off their nests, besides running all over the flower beds. You know how devoted he is to his poultry and garden."

"Anyhow, he needn't have gone on about it for the entire evening and then have said, 'Let's say no more about it' just when I was beginning to enjoy the discussion. That's where one of my petty vindictive revenges came in," added Laura with an unrepentant chuckle; "I turned the entire family of speckled Sussex into his seedling shed the day after the puppy episode."

"How could you?" exclaimed Amanda.

"It came quite easy," said Laura; "two of the hens pretended to be laying at the time, but I was firm."

"And we thought it was an accident!"

"You see," resumed Laura, "I really *have* some grounds for supposing that my next incarnation will be in a lower organism. I shall be an animal of some kind. On the other hand, I haven't been a bad sort in my way, so I think I may count on being a nice animal, something elegant and lively, with a love of fun. An otter, perhaps."

"I can't imagine you as an otter," said Amanda.

"Well, I don't suppose you can imagine me as an angel, if it comes to that," said Laura.

Amanda was silent. She couldn't.

"Personally I think an otter life would be rather enjoyable," continued Laura; "salmon to eat all the year round, and the satisfaction of being able to fetch the trout in their own homes without having to wait for hours till they condescend to rise to the fly you've been dangling before them; and an elegant svelte figure——"

"Think of the otter hounds," interposed Amanda; "how dreadful to be hunted and harried and finally worried to death!"

"Rather fun with half the neighbourhood looking on, and anyhow not worse than this Saturday-to-Tuesday business of dying by inches; and then I should go on into something else. If I had been a moderately good otter I suppose I should get back into human shape of some sort; probably something rather primitive—a little brown, unclothed Nubian boy, I should think."

"I wish you would be serious," sighed Amanda; "you really ought to be if you're only going to live till Tuesday."

As a matter of fact Laura died on Monday.

"So dreadfully upsetting," Amanda complained to her uncle-in-law, Sir Lulworth Quayne. "I've asked quite a lot of people for golf and fishing, and the rhododendrons are just looking their best."

"Laura always was inconsiderate," said Sir Lulworth; "she was born during Goodwood week, with an Ambassador staying in the house who hated babies."

"She had the maddest kind of ideas," said Amanda; "do you know if there was any insanity in her family?"

"Insanity? No, I never heard of any. Her father lives in West Kensington, but I believe he is sane on all other subjects."

"She had an idea that she was going to be reincarnated as an otter," said Amanda.

"One meets with those ideas of reincarnation so frequently,

even in the West," said Sir Lulworth, "that one can hardly set them down as being mad. And Laura was such an unaccountable person in this life that I should not like to lay down definite rules as to what she might be doing in an after state."

"You think she might really have passed into some animal form?" asked Amanda. She was one of those who shape their opinions rather readily from the standpoint of those around them.

Just then Egbert entered the breakfast-room, wearing an air of bereavement that Laura's demise would have been insufficient, in itself, to account for.

"Four of my speckled Sussex have been killed," he exclaimed; "the very four that were to go to the show on Friday. One of them was dragged away and eaten right in the middle of the new carnation bed that I've been to such trouble and expense over. My best flower bed and my best fowls singled out for destruction; it almost seems as if the brute that did the deed had special knowledge how to be as devastating as possible in a short space of time."

"Was it a fox, do you think?" asked Amanda.

"Sounds more like a polecat," said Sir Lulworth.

"No," said Egbert, "there were marks of webbed feet all over the place, and we followed the tracks down to the stream at the bottom of the garden; evidently an otter."

Amanda looked quickly and furtively across at Sir Lulworth.

Egbert was too agitated to eat any breakfast, and went out to superintend the strengthening of the poultry yard defences.

"I think she might at least have waited till the funeral was over," said Amanda in a scandalized voice.

"It's her own funeral, you know," said Sir Lulworth; "it's a nice point in etiquette how far one ought to show respect to one's own mortal remains."

Disregard for mortuary convention was carried to further lengths next day; during the absence of the family at the funeral ceremony the remaining survivors of the speckled Sussex were massacred. The marauder's line of retreat seemed

to have embraced most of the flower beds on the lawn, but the strawberry beds in the lower garden had also suffered.

"I shall get the otter hounds to come here at the earliest possible moment," said Egbert savagely.

"On no account! You can't dream of such a thing!" exclaimed Amanda. "I mean it wouldn't do, so soon after a funeral in the house."

"It's a case of necessity," said Egbert; "once an otter takes to that sort of thing it won't stop."

"Perhaps it will go elsewhere now that there are no more fowls left," suggested Amanda.

"One would think you wanted to shield the beast," said Egbert.

"There's been so little water in the stream lately," objected Amanda; "it seems hardly sporting to hunt an animal when it has so little chance of taking refuge anywhere."

"Good gracious!" fumed Egbert, "I'm not thinking about sport. I want to have the animal killed as soon as possible."

Even Amanda's opposition weakened when, during church time on the following Sunday, the otter made its way into the house, raided half a salmon from the larder and worried it into scaly fragments on the Persian rug in Egbert's studio.

"We shall have it hiding under our beds and biting pieces out of our feet before long," said Egbert, and from what Amanda knew of this particular otter she felt that the possibility was not a remote one.

On the evening preceding the day fixed for the hunt Amanda spent a solitary hour walking by the banks of the stream, making what she imagined to be hound noises. It was charitably supposed by those who overheard her performance, that she was practising for farmyard imitations at the forthcoming village entertainment.

It was her friend and neighbour, Aurora Burret, who brought her news of the day's sport.

"Pity you weren't out; we had quite a good day. We found at once, in the pool just below your garden."

"Did you—kill?" asked Amanda.

"Rather. A fine she-otter. Your husband got rather badly bitten in trying to 'tail it.' Poor beast, I felt quite sorry for it, it had such a human look in its eyes when it was killed. You'll call me silly, but do you know who the look reminded me of? My dear woman, what is the matter?"

When Amanda had recovered to a certain extent from her attack of nervous prostration Egbert took her to the Nile Valley to recuperate. Change of scene speedily brought about the desired recovery of health and mental balance. The escapades of an adventurous otter in search of a variation of diet were viewed in their proper light. Amanda's normally placid temperament reasserted itself. Even a hurricane of shouted curses, coming from her husband's dressing-room, in her husband's voice, but hardly in his usual vocabulary, failed to disturb her serenity as she made a leisurely toilet one evening in a Cairo hotel.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" she asked in amused curiosity.

"The little beast has thrown all my clean shirts into the bath! Wait till I catch you, you little——"

"What little beast?" asked Amanda, suppressing a desire to laugh; Egbert's language was so hopelessly inadequate to express his outraged feelings.

"A little beast of a naked brown Nubian boy," spluttered Egbert.

And now Amanda is seriously ill.

The Monkey¹

BY ISAK DINESEN

In a few of the Lutheran countries of northern Europe there are still in existence places which make use of the name convent, and are governed by a prioress or chanoiness, although they are of no religious nature. They are retreats for unmarried ladies and widows of noble birth who here pass the autumn and winter days of their lives in a dignified and comfortable routine, according to the traditions of the houses. Many of these institutions are extremely wealthy, own great stretches of land, and have had, during the centuries, inheritances and legacies bequeathed to them. A proud and kindly spirit of past feudal times seems to dwell in the stately buildings and to guide the existence of the communities.

The Virgin Prioress of Closter Seven, under whose hands the convent prospered from the year 1818 to that of 1845,

¹From *Seven Gothic Tales*, by Isak Dinesen. Copyright, 1944, by Random House, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc., New York; Putnam & Company, Ltd., London.

had a little gray monkey which had been given her by her cousin, Admiral von Schreckenstein, on his return from Zanzibar, and of which she was very fond. When she was at her card table, a place where she spent some of her happiest hours, the monkey was wont to sit on the back of her chair, and to follow with its glittering eyes the course of the cards as they were dealt out and taken in. At other times it would be found, in the early mornings, on top of the stepladder in the library, pulling out brittle folios a hundred years old, and scattering over the black-and-white marble floor browned leaves dealing with strategy, princely marriage contracts, and witches' trials.

In a different society the monkey might not have been popular. But the convent of Closter Seven held, co-ordinately with its estimable female population, a whole world of pets of all sorts, and was well aware of the order of precedence therein. There were here parrots and cockatoos, small dogs, graceful cats from all parts of the world, a white Angora goat, like that of Esmeralda, and a purple-eyed young fallow deer. There was even a tortoise which was supposed to be more than a hundred years old. The old ladies therefore showed a forbearance with the whims of the Prioress's favorite, much like that which courtiers of a petticoat-governed court of the old days, conscious of their own frailty, might have shown toward the caprices of a royal maitresse-en-titre.

From time to time, particularly in the autumn, when nuts were ripening in the hedges along the roads and in the large forests that surrounded the convent, it happened that the Prioress's monkey would feel the call of a freer life and would disappear for a few weeks or a month, to come back of its own accord when the night frosts set in. The children of the villages belonging to Closter Seven would then come upon it running across the road or sitting in a tree, from where it watched them attentively. But when they gathered around it and started to bombard it with chestnuts from their pockets, it would roll its eyes and grind its teeth at them, and finish by swiftly mounting the branches to disappear in the crowns of the forest.

It was the general opinion, or a standing joke amongst the ladies of the convent, that the Prioress, during these periods, would become silent and the victim of a particular restlessness, and would seem loth to act in the affairs of the house, in which at ordinary times she showed great vigor. Amongst themselves they called the monkey her *Geheimrat*, and they rejoiced when it was to be seen again in her drawing-room, a little chilled after its stay in the woods.

Upon a fine October day, when the monkey had in this way been missing for some weeks, the Prioress's young nephew and godson, who was a lieutenant in the Royal Guards, arrived unexpectedly at the convent.

The Prioress was held in high respect by all her relations, and had in her time presented at the font many babies of her own noble blood, but this young man was her favorite amongst them. He was a graceful boy of twenty-two, with dark hair and blue eyes. Although he was a younger son, he was fortunately situated in life. He was the preferred child of his mother, who had come from Russia and had been an heiress; he had made a fine career. He had friends, not everywhere in the world, but everywhere in that world that is of any significance.

On his arrival at the convent he did not, however, look like a young man under a lucky star. He came, as already said, in headlong hurry and unannounced, and the ladies with whom he exchanged a few words while waiting for admission to his aunt, and who were all fond of him, noticed that he was pale and looked deadly tired, as if under some great agitation of mind.

They were not unaware, either, that he might have reason to be so. Although Closter Seven was a small world of its own, and moved in a particular atmosphere of peace and immutability, news of the greater world outside reached it with surprising quickness, for each of the ladies had her own watchful and zealous correspondents there. Thus these cloistered women knew, just as well as the people in the center of things, that during the last month clouds of strange and sinister na-

ture had been gathering over the heads of that very regiment and circle of friends to which the boy belonged. A sanctimonious clique of the capital, led by the Court-Chaplain, of all people, who had the ear of high personages, had, under pretense of moral indignation, lifted their voices against these young flowers of the land, and nobody knew for certain, or could even imagine, what might come out of that.

The ladies had not discussed these happenings much amongst themselves, but the librarian of the convent, who was a theologian and a scholar, had been dragged away into more than one tête-à-tête, and encouraged to give his opinion on the problem. From him they had learnt to connect it somehow with those romantic and sacred shores of ancient Greece which they had till now held in high esteem. Remembering their young days, when everything Greek had been *le dernier cri*, and frocks and coiffures had been named *à la grecque*, they wondered—Could the expression be used also to designate anything so little related to their young ladies' dreams of refinement? They had loved those frocks, they had waltzed with princes in them; now they thought of them with uneasiness.

Few things could have stirred their natures more deeply. It was not only the impudence of the heroes of the pulpit and the quill attacking warriors which revolted the old daughters of a fighting race, or the presentiment of trouble and much woe that worried them, but something in the matter which went deeper than that. To all of them it had been a fundamental article of faith that woman's loveliness and charm, which they themselves represented in their own sphere and according to their gifts, must constitute the highest inspiration and prize of life. In their own individual cases the world might have spread snares in order to capture this prize of their being at less cost than they meant it to, or there might have been a strange misunderstanding, a lack of appreciation, on the part of the world, but still the dogma held good. To hear it disputed now meant to them what it would mean to a miser to be told that gold no longer had absolute value, or to a mystic to have it asserted that the Lord was not present in the Eucharist.

Had they known that it might ever be called into question, all these lives, which were now so nearly finished, might have come to look very different. To a few proud old maids, who had the strategic instincts of their breed developed to the full, these new conceptions came very hard. So might have come, to a gallant and faithful old general who through a long campaign, in loyalty to higher orders, had stood strictly upon the defensive, the information that an offensive would have been the right, and approved, move.

Still in the midst of their inquietude every one of the old women would have liked to have heard more of this strange heresy, as if, after all, the tender and dangerous emotions of the human heart were, even within their own safe reclusion, by right their domain. It was as if the tall bouquets of dried flowers in front of the convents' pier glasses had stirred and claimed authority when a question of floriculture was being raised.

They gave the pale boy an unsure welcome, as if he might have been either one of Herod's child martyrs, or a young priest of black magic, still within hope of conversion, and when he walked up the broad stair which led to the Prioress's rooms, they evaded one another's eyes.

The prioress received her nephew within her lofty parlor. Its three tall windows looked out, between heavy curtains which had on them borders of flower garlands done in cross-stitch, over the lawns and avenues of the autumnal garden. From the damask-clad walls her long-departed father and mother gazed down, out of broad gilt frames, with military gravity and youthful grace, powdered and laced for some great court occasion. Those two had been the young man's friends since he was a baby, yet today he was struck and surprised by a puzzled, even a worried, look upon their faces. It seemed to him also, for a moment, that there was a certain strange and disquieting smell in the room, mixed with that of the incense sticks, which were being burned more amply than usual. Was this, he thought, a new aspect of the catastrophic tendencies of his existence?

The boy, while taking in the whole well-known and harmonious atmosphere, did not want or dare to waste time. After he had kissed his aunt's hand, inquired after her health and the monkey and given her the news of his own people in town, he came straight to the matter which had brought him to Closter Seven.

"Aunt Cathinka," he said, "I have come to you because you have always been so good to me. I should like—" here he swallowed to keep his rebellious heart in place, knowing how little indeed it would like it—"to marry, and I hope that you will give me your advice and help."

The boy was well aware that under ordinary circumstances nothing that he could have said could possibly have pleased the old woman better. Thus did life, he thought, manage to satisfy its taste for parody, even in relation to people like his aunt, whom in his own heart he had named after the Chinese goddess Kuan-Yin, the deity of mercy and of benignant subtlety. He thought that in this case she would suffer from the irony of destiny more than he himself, and it made him feel sorry for her.

On his way to the convent, driving through the forests and little villages, past long stretches of stubble-fields on which large flocks of geese were feeding, herded by bare-legged children and young girls, he had been trying to imagine how the meeting between his aunt and himself would be likely to develop. Knowing the old lady's weakness for little Latin phrases, he had wondered if he would get from her lips *Et tu, Brute*, or a decided *Discite justitiam moniti, et non temnere divos*. Perhaps she would say *Ad sanitatem gradus est novisse morbum*—that would be a better sign.

After a moment he looked straight at the old lady's face. Her high-backed chair was in the chiaroscuro of the lace curtain, while he had on him the full light of the afternoon sun.

From the shade her luminous eyes met his, and made him look away, and this dumb play was repeated twice over.

"Mon cher enfant," she said at last in a gentle voice which gave him the impression of firmness, although it had in it a curious little shiver, "it has long been a prayer of my heart that you should make this decision. On what help an old woman, outside the world, can give you, dear Boris, you can surely rely."

Boris looked up with smiling eyes in a white face. After a terribly agitated week, and a row of wild scenes which his mother's love and jealousy had caused, he felt like a person who is, from a flooded town, taken up into a boat. As soon as he could speak he said: "It is all for you to decide, Aunt Cathinka," trusting that the sweetness of power would call out all the generosity of the old woman's nature.

She kept her eyes on him, kindly. They took possession of him as if she had actually been drawing him to her bosom, or even within the closer circle of her heart. She held her little handkerchief to her mouth, a gesture common with her when she was moved. She would help him, he felt, but she had something to say first.

"What is it," she said very slowly, in the manner of a sibylla, "which is bought dearly, offered for nothing, and then most often refused?—Experience, old people's experience. If the children of Adam and Eve had been prepared to make use of their parents' experience, the world would have been behaving sensibly six thousand years ago. I will give you my experience of life in a little pill, sugar-coated by poetry to make it go down: 'For as of all the ways of life but one—the path of duty—leads to happiness.'" Boris sat silent for a moment. "Aunt Cathinka," he said at last, "why should there be only one way? I know that good people think so, and I was taught it myself at my confirmation, but still the motto of our family is: 'Find a way or make it.' Neither can you read any cookery book which will not give you at least three or four ways of making a chicken ragout, or more. And when Columbus sailed out and discovered America," he went on, because

these were thoughts which had occupied him lately, and the Prioress was a friend of his, to whom he could venture to express them, "he really did so to find the back way to the Indies, and it was considered a heroic exploit." "Ah," said the Prioress with great energy, "Dr. Sass, who was the parson of Closter Seven in the seventeenth century, maintained that in paradise, until the time of the fall, the whole world was flat, the back-curtain of the Lord, and that it was the devil who invented a third dimension. Thus are the words 'straight,' 'square,' and 'flat' the words of noblemen, but the apple was an orb, and the sin of our first parents, the attempt at getting around God. I myself much prefer the art of painting to sculpture." Boris did not contradict her. His own taste differed from hers here, but she might be right. Up to now he had congratulated himself upon his talent for enjoying life from all sides, but lately he had come to consider it a doubtful blessing. It was to this, he thought, that he owed what seemed to be his fate: to get everything he wanted at a time when he no longer wanted it. He knew from experience how a wild craving for an orgy, or music, or the sea, or confidence might, before there had been time for its fulfillment, have ceased to exist—as in the case of a star, of which the light only reaches the earth long after it has itself gone under—so that at the moment when his wish was about to be granted him, only a bullfight, or the life of a peasant plowing his land in the rain, would satisfy the hunger of his soul.

The Prioress looked him up and down, and said:

*"Straight is the line of duty,
Curved is the line of beauty.
Follow the straight line; thou shalt see
The curved line ever follows thee."*

The boy thought the poem over.

A decanter of wine and some fruit were at this moment brought in for him, and he understood that she wanted him to keep quiet. He drank two glasses, which did him good, and in silence peeled the famous silky pears of Closter Seven,

and picked the dim black grapes off their stems one by one. Without looking at his aunt he could follow all her thoughts. The dramatic urgency for quick action, which might have frightened another person of her age, did not upset her in the least. She had amongst her ancestors great lords of war who had prepared campaigns with skill, but who had also had it in them to give over at the right moment to pure inspiration.

He understood that for her in these moments her red parlor was filled with young virgins of high birth—dark and fair, slim and junoesque, good housekeepers, good horsewomen, granddaughters of schoolmates and friends of her youth—a muster-roll of young femininity, who could hide no excellency or shortcoming from her clear eyes. Spiritually she was licking her lips, like an old connoisseur walking through his cellar, and Boris himself followed her in thought, like the butler who is holding the candle.

Just then the door opened and the Prioress's old servant came in again, this time with a letter on a silver tray, which he presented to her. She took it with a hand that trembled a little, as if she could not very well take in any more catastrophe, read it through, read it again, and colored faintly. "It is all right, Johann," she said, keeping the letter in her silken lap.

She sat for a little while in deep thought. Then she turned to the boy, her dark eyes clear as glass. "You have come through my new fir plantation," she said with the animation of a person talking about a hobby. "What do you think of it?" The planting and upkeep of forests were indeed among her greatest interests in life. They talked for some time pleasantly of trees. There was nothing for your health, she said, like forest air. She herself was never able to pass a good night in town or amongst fields, but to lie down at night knowing that you had the trees around you for miles, their roots so deep in the earth, their crowns moving in the dark, she considered to be one of the delights of life. The forest had always done Boris good when he had been staying at Closter Seven as a child. Even now he would notice a difference when he had been

in town for a long time, and she wished that she could get him down more often. "And who, Boris," she said with a sudden skip of thought and a bright and determined benevolence, "who, now that we come to talk about it, could indeed make you a better wife than that great friend of yours and mine, little Athena Hopballehus?"

No name could in this connection have come more unexpectedly to Boris. He was too surprised to answer. The phrase itself sounded absurd to him. He had never heard Athena described as little, and he remembered her as being half an inch taller than himself. But that the Prioress should speak of her as a great friend showed a complete change of spirit, for he was sure that ever since their neighbor's daughter had grown up, his aunt and his mother, who were rarely of one mind, had been joining forces to keep him and Athena apart.

As his mind turned from this unaccountable veering on the part of the old lady to the effect which it might have upon his own destiny, he found that he did not dislike the idea. The burlesque he had always liked, and it might even be an extravaganza of the first water to bring Athena to town as his wife. So when he looked at his aunt he had the face of a child. "I have the greatest faith in your judgment, Aunt Cathinka," he said.

The Prioress now spoke very slowly, not looking at him, as if she did not want any impressions from other minds to intermingle with her own. "We will not waste time, Boris," she said. "That has never been my habit once my mind was made up." And that means, never at all, Boris thought. "You go and change into your uniform, and I will in the meantime write a letter to the old Count. I will tell him how you have made me your confidante in this matter of your heart, upon which the happiness of your life depends, and in which your dear mother has not been able to give you her sympathy. And you, you must be ready to go within half an hour."

"Do you think, Aunt Cathinka, that Athena will have me?" asked Boris as he rose to go. He was always quick to feel sorry for other people. Now, looking out over the garden, and seeing

two of the old ladies emerge, in galoshes, from one of the avenues, wherein they had been taking their afternoon walk, he felt sorry for Athena for merely existing. "Athena," the Prioress was saying, "has never had an offer of marriage in her life. I doubt if, for the last year, she has seen any man but Pastor Rosenquist, who comes to play chess with her papa. She has heard my ladies discuss the brilliant marriages which you might have made if you had wanted to. If Athena will not have you, my little Boris," she said, and smiled at him very sweetly, "I will."

Boris kissed her hand for this, and reflected what an excellent arrangement it might prove to be, and then all at once he got such a terrible impression of strength and cunning that it was as if he had touched an electric eel. Women, he thought, when they are old enough to have done with the business of being women, and can let loose their strength, must be the most powerful creatures in the whole world. He gazed at his aunt's refined face.

No, it would not do, he thought.

Boris drove from Closter Seven in the Prioress's britzska, with her letter upon his heart, looking the ideal young hero of romance. The news of his errand had spread mysteriously in the convent, as if it had been a new kind of incense, and had gone straight to the hearts of the old ladies. Two or three of them were sitting in the sun on the long terrace to see him go, and a particular friend of his, a corpulent old maid, bleached by having been kept for fifty years from all the lights of life, stood beside his carriage to hand him three long-stemmed white asters from her little winter garden. Thus had gone away, thirty years ago, the young man she loved, and then he had been killed at Jena. A gentle melancholy veiled her always, and her lady companion said of her: "The Countess Anastasia has a heavy cross. The love of eating is a heavy cross." But it was the memory of this last parting of theirs that

had kept her eyes, in her puny face, bright like light blue enamel. She felt at the moment the resurrection of an entire destiny, and handed him her flowers as if they had been some part of it, mysteriously come to life in a second round, as if they had been her three unborn daughters, now tall and marriageable, joining his journey in the quality of bridesmaids.

Boris had left his servant at the convent, for he knew him to be in love with one of the lady's maids, and it seemed to him that he ought now to show sympathy towards all legitimate lovemaking. He wished to be alone. Solitude was always a pleasure to him, and he never had much opportunity for it. Lately he seemed never to have been alone at all. When people were not at him, working upon his feelings with all their might, they had still succeeded in making him take up their line of thought, until he felt those convolutions of the brain which had to do with these matters aching as if they were worn out. Even on his way down to the convent he had been made to think the thoughts of other people. Now, he thought with great contentment, for an hour he could think whatever he liked.

The road from Closter Seven to Hopballehus rises more than five hundred feet and winds through tall pine forest. From time to time this opens and affords a magnificent view over large stretches of land below. Now in the afternoon sun the trunks of the fir trees were burning red, and the landscape far away seemed cool, all blue and pale gold. Boris was able now to believe what the old gardener at the convent had told him when he was a child: that he had once seen, about this time of the year and the day, a herd of unicorns come out of the woods to graze upon the sunny slopes, the white and dappled mares, rosy in the sun, treading daintily and looking around for their young, the old stallion, darker roan, sniffing and pawing the ground. The air here smelled of fir leaves and toadstools, and was so fresh that it made him yawn. And yet, he thought, it was different from the freshness of spring; the courage and gayety of it were tinged with despair. It was the finale of the symphony.

He remembered how he had, upon a May evening not six months ago, been taken into the young heart of spring, as now into the sad heart of autumn. He and a young friend of his had amused themselves by wandering for three weeks about the country, visiting places where nobody had known them to be. They had traveled in a caravan, carrying with them a little theater of dolls, and had given performances of plays which they made up themselves in the villages that they came through. The air had been filled with sweet smells, the nightingales had been raving within the bird cherries, the moon stood high, not much paler than the sky of those nights of spring.

One night they had come, very tired, to a farmhouse in a grass field, and had been given a large bed in a room that had in it a grandfather's clock and a dim looking-glass. Just as the clock was striking twelve, three quite young girls appeared on the threshold in their shifts, each with a lighted candle in her hand, but the night was so clear that the little flames looked only like little drops of the moon. They clearly did not know that two wayfaring young men had been taken in and given the large bedroom, and the guests watched them in deep silence from behind the hangings of the big bed. Without looking at one another, without a word, one by one they dropped their slight garments on the floor and quite naked they walked up to the mirror and looked into it, the candle held high overhead, absorbed in the picture. Then they blew out their candles, and in the same solemn silence they walked backward to the door, their long hair hanging down, got into their shifts, and disappeared. The nightingales kept on singing outside, in a green bush near the window. The two boys remembered that this was Walpurgis Night, and decided that what they had witnessed was some witchcraft by which these girls had hoped to catch a glimpse of their future husbands.

He had not been up this way for a long time, not since, as a child, he had gone with the Prioress in her landaulet to pay a call at her neighbors'. He recognized the curves, but they had

shrunk, and he fell to meditating upon the subject of change.

The real difference between God and human beings, he thought, was that God cannot stand continuance. No sooner has he created a season of a year, or a time of the day, than he wishes for something quite different, and sweeps it all away. No sooner was one a young man, and happy at that, than the nature of things would rush one into marriage, martyrdom of old age. And human beings cleave to the existing state of things. All their lives they are striving to hold the moment fast, and are up against a force majeure. Their art itself is nothing but the attempt to catch by all means the one particular moment, one mood, one light, the momentary beauty of one woman or one flower, and make it everlasting. It is all wrong, he thought, to imagine paradise as a never-changing state of bliss. It will probably, on the contrary, turn out to be, in the true spirit of God, an incessant up and down, a whirlpool of change. Only you may yourself, by that time, have become one with God, and have taken to liking it. He thought with deep sadness of all the young men who had been, through the ages, perfect in beauty and vigor—young pharaohs with clean-cut faces hunting in chariots along the Nile, young Chinese sages, silk-clad, reading within the live shade of willows—who had been changed, against their wishes, into supporters of society, fathers-in-law, authorities on food and morals. All this was sad.

A turning of the road and a long vista cut through the wood brought him face to face with Hopballehus, still at a distance. The old architect of two hundred years ago had succeeded in building something so enormous that it fell in with nature, and might have been a little formation of the gray rock. To someone now standing on the terrace, Boris thought, I and the britzska and the gray and black horses would look diminutive, hardly distinguishable.

The sight of the house turned his thoughts toward it. It had always appealed to his imagination. Even now, when he had not seen it for years, it would happen that he would dream of it at night. It was in itself a fantastic place, resting upon a

large plateau, with miles of avenues around it, rows of statues and fountains, built in late baroque and now baroquely dilapidated and more than half a ruin. It seemed a sort of Olympus, more Olympic still for the doom which was hanging over it. The existence therein of the old Count and his daughter had about it something Olympic as well. They lived, but how they got through the twenty-four hours of their day and night must remain a mystery to humans. The old Count, who had once been a brilliant diplomatist, a scientist and a poet, had for many years been absorbed in a great lawsuit which he had going on in Poland, and which he had inherited from his father and grandfather. If he could win it, it would give him back the immense riches and estates that had once belonged to his family, but it was known that he could never win it, and it was only ruining him with ever greater speed. He lived in those gigantic worries as in clouds which made all his movements dim. Boris had at times wondered what the world looked like to his daughter. Money, if she had ever seen it, he knew to hold no place in her life; no more did society or what is called the pleasures of life, and he wondered if she had ever heard of love. God knows, he thought, if she has ever looked at herself in a glass.

The light carriage swished through the layers of fallen leaves upon the terrace. In places they lay so thick that they half covered the stone balusters and reached the knees of Dian's stag. But the trees were bare; only here and there a single golden leaf trembled high upon the black twigs. Following the curve of the road, Boris's carriage came straight upon the main terrace and the house, majestic as the Sphinx herself in the sunset. The light of the setting sun seemed to have soaked into the dull masses of stone. They reddened and glowed with it until the whole place became a mysterious, a glorified, abode, in which the tall windows shone like a row of evening stars.

Boris got out of the britzka in front of the mighty stone stairs and walked toward them, feeling for his letter. Nothing stirred in the house. It was like walking into a cathedral. And,

he thought, by the time that I get into that carriage once more, what will everything be like to me?

At this moment the heavy doors above the stairs were flung open, and the old Count appeared at the top step, standing like Samson when in his wrath he broke down the temple of the Philistines.

He was always a striking figure, short in the legs and with the torso of a giant, his mighty head surrounded by a mane of wild gray hair, like a poet's or a lion's. But today he seemed strangely inspired, in the grip of some tremendous emotion, swaying where he stood. He remained for a moment immovable, scrutinizing his visitor, like an old man gorilla outside his lair, ready for the attack; then he came down the stairs upon the young man, imposing upon him a presence such as the Lord himself might have shown had he descended, for once, the ladder of Jacob.

Good God, thought Boris, as he walked up the steps to meet him, this old man knows all, and is going to kill me. He had a glimpse of the old Count's face, filled with wild triumph, the light eyes aflame. The next moment he felt his arms around him, and his body trembling against his own.

"Boris!" he cried, "Boris, my child," for he had known the boy from childhood, and had, Boris was aware, once been one of his beautiful mother's adorers, "welcome. Welcome here today. Do you know?" "Know?" said Boris. "I have won my case," said the old man. Boris stared at him. "I have won my case in Poland," he repeated. "Lariki, Lipnika, Parnov Grabovo—they are all mine, as they were the old people's."

"I congratulate you," said Boris, slowly, his thoughts strangely put into motion. "With all my heart. This is unexpected news indeed!" The old Count thanked him many times, and showed him the letter from his lawyer, which he had just received, and was still holding in his hand. As he was talking to the boy he spoke slowly at first, seeking for his words, as a man out of the habit of speech, but as he went on he recovered

his old voice and speech that had in the old days charmed so many people. "A great passion, Boris," he said, "such as does really and truly devour your heart and soul, you cannot feel for individual beings. Perhaps you cannot feel it for anything which is capable of loving you in return. Those officers who have loved their armies, those lords who have loved their soil, they can talk about passion. My God, I have the whole weight of the land of Hopballehus upon my chest at night, when I imagined that I had been leading it into a lost battle. But this," he said, drawing a deep breath, "this is happiness." Boris understood that it was not the thought of his riches which filled the soul of the old man, but the triumph of right over wrong, the righteousness of the entire universe being, to him, concentrated in his own figure. He began to explain the judgment in detail, still with one hand upon the young man's shoulder, and Boris felt that he was welcome to his heart as a friend who could listen. "Come in, come in, Boris," he said, "we will drink a glass together, you and I, from the wine which I have put aside for today. Our good Pastor is here. I sent for him when I got the letter, to keep me company, as I did not know that you would be coming."

Within the prodigious hall, richly ornamented with black marble, a small corner was made habitable by a few chairs and a table, covered with the Count's books and papers. Above it was a gigantic picture, much darkened by age, an equestrian portrait of an old lord of the house, holding himself very calm upon a rearing horse with a small head, and pointing with a roll of paper toward a battlefield depicted in the distance under the belly of the horse. Pastor Rosenquist, a short man with red cheeks, who had for many years been the spiritual guide of the family, and whom Boris knew well, was sitting in one of the chairs, apparently in deep thought. The happenings of the day had brought disorder in his theories, which was to him a more serious disaster than if the parsonage had burnt down. He had suffered from poverty and misfortunes all his life, and had in the course of time come to live upon a system of spiritual bookkeeping according to

which earthly trials became an investment, drawing interest in the other world. His own personal account, he knew, was made up in very small change, but he had taken a great interest in the old Count's sorrows, and had looked upon him as a favorite of the Lord's, whose treasures were all the time accumulating in the new Jerusalem, like to sapphires, chrysoprase and amethyst propagating on their own. Now he was upset and did not know what to think, which to him was a terrible condition. He had sought comfort in the book of Job, but even there the figures would not agree, Behemoth and Leviathan coming in upon an account of losses and profits of their own. The whole affair seemed to him in the nature of a gift, which, according to Ecclesiastes, destroyeth the heart, and he could not get away from the thought that this old man, whom he loved, was in the bad way of anticipating his income.

"Now I would," said the old Count, when he had fetched and opened the golden bottle, "that my poor father and my dear grandfather were here with us to drink this wine. I have felt, as I have lain awake at night, that they have kept awake with me within their sarcophagi below. I am happy," he went on as, still standing, he lifted his glass, "that it be the son of Abunde"—that was his old name for Boris's mother—"who drinks here with me tonight." In the exuberance of his heart he patted Boris's cheek with tenderness, while his face radiated a gentleness which had been in exile for years; and the boy, who knew a good thing when he saw it, envied the old man his innocence of heart. "And to our good Pastor," the Count said, turning to him. "My friend, you have shed tears of sympathy in this house. They arise now as wine."

The old Count's manner heightened Pastor Rosenquist's uneasiness. It seemed to him that only a frivolous heart could move with such ease in a new atmosphere, forgetting the old. Brought up himself upon a system of examinations and promotions, he was not prepared to understand a race reared upon the laws of luck in war and court favor, adjusted for the unforeseen and accustomed to the unexpected, for whom to be safe, or even saved, seems the least necessary of all things.

Then again came into his mind the words of the Scripture—"He saith amongst the trumpets, ha, ha!"—and he thought that perhaps after all his old friend was right. "Yes, yes," he said, smiling, "water has certainly been changed into wine, once. It is without doubt a good drink. But you know what our good peasants hold: that wine-begotten children will end badly. So, we have reason to fear, will wine-begotten hopes and moods. Though that," he added, "would not, of course, apply to the children of the wedding of Cana, of which I was just speaking."

"At Larika," said the Count, "there is hung, in the ceiling of the gateway, a hunting horn in an iron chain. My grandfather's grandfather was a man of herculean strength. When in the evening he rode through the gate, he used to take hold of the horn, and, lifting himself and his horse from the ground, he blew it. I have known that I could do the same, but thought I should never ride through that gate. Athena might do it, too," he added thoughtfully.

He refilled his glasses. "How is it that you came here to-day?" he asked Boris, beaming upon him and his gala uniform, as if his coming had been a unique exploit. "What brings you to Hopballehus?" Boris felt the old man's openness reflected in his own heart, like a blue sky in the sea. He looked into his friend's face. "I came here today," he said, "to ask Athena to marry me." The old man gave him a great, luminous glance. "To ask Athena to marry you!" he exclaimed. "You came here today for that?" He stood for a moment, deeply moved. "The ways of God are strange indeed," he said. Pastor Rosenquist rose from his chair and sat down again, to arrange his accounts.

When the old Count spoke again he was much changed. The intoxication was gone, and he seemed to have collected the forces of his nature in good order. It was this balance which had given him a name in the old days, when he had, as a young man of the Embassy in Paris, upon the first night of his tragedy, *The Undine*, fought a duel with pistols in the entr'acte.

"Boris, my child," he said, "you have come here to change my heart. I have been living with my face toward the past, or for this hour of victory. This moment is the first in which I have thought of the future. I see that I shall have to come down from a pinnacle to walk along a road. Your words are opening up a great vista to what. What am I to be? The patriarch of Hopballehus, crowning virtuous village maidens? Grandpapa, planting apple trees? Ave, Hopballehus. *Naturite salutem.*"

Boris remembered the Prioress's letter, and told the old man how he had called at Closter Seven on his way. The Count inquired after the lady, and, always keen on all sorts of papers, he put on his glasses and became absorbed in the letter. Boris sat and drank his wine in a happy mood. During the last week he had come to doubt whether life ever held anything pleasant at all. Now his reception in the old Count's house was to him a show of the most enjoyable kind, and he always moved with ease from one mood to another.

When the Count had finished the reading, he laid the letter down and, keeping his folded hands upon it, he sat for a long time silent.

"I give you," he said at last slowly and solemnly, "my blessing. First I give it to the son of your mother—and of your father—secondly to the young man who, as I see now, has loved so long against all. And finally I feel that you have been sent, Boris, by stronger hands than your own tonight.

"I give you, in Athena, the key of my whole world. Athena," he repeated, as if it gave him joy to pronounce his daughter's name, "is herself like a hunting-horn in the woods." And as if, without knowing it himself, some strange and sad memory of his youth had taken possession of him, he added, almost in a whisper, "Dieu, que le son du cor est triste au fond du bois."

While they had been talking, a strong wind had sprung up outside. The day had been still. This blowing weather had

come with the dusk, like an animal of the night. It swept along the long walls, around the corners of the house, and whirled the dead leaves up in the air. In the midst of it, Athena, who had been out spanning the horse from Pastor Rosenquist's trap in the stables, was heard to cross the terrace and come up the stairs.

The old Count, whose eyes had been dwelling on Boris's face, made a sudden movement, as if he had been alarmed by something he did not himself understand. "Do not speak to her tonight," he said. "You will understand: our friend, the Pastor, Athena and myself have had so many evenings here, together. Let this be the last of them. I will tell her myself, and you, my dear son, come back to Hopballehus tomorrow morning." Boris thought this a good plan. As the Count spoke, his daughter came into the room, still in her big cloak.

Athena was a strong woman of eighteen, six feet high and broad in proportion, with a pair of shoulders which could lift and carry a sack of wheat. At forty she would be enormous, but now she was too young to be fat, and straight as a larch tree. Beneath her flaming hair her noble forehead was white as milk; lower down her face was, like her broad wrists, covered with freckles. Still she was so fair and clear of skin that she seemed to lighten up the hall on entering it, with that light that you will get inside a room when the snow is lying outside. Her clear eyes had a darker ring around the iris—a pair of eyes for a young lioness or eagle—otherwise the strong young creature's countenance was peaceful, and her round face had that expression of attention and reserve which is ordinarily found in the faces of people who are hard of hearing. When he had been with her, Boris had sometimes thought of the old ballad about the giant's daughter, who finds a man in the wood, and, surprised and pleased, takes him home to play with. The giant orders her to let him go, telling her that she will only break him.

The giant himself, the old Count, showed her an old-fashioned chivalrousness which appeared to Boris like a rather noble old coin, dug out of the ground, and keeping its gold

value, even when no more current. It was said that the Count had been, in his young days, one of the lovers of Princess Pauline Borghese, who was the loveliest woman of her time. He had seen Venus Anadyomene face to face, and for the sake of that vision gave homage to the likeness of the goddess, even where it was more clumsily cut in wood or stone. With no claim to beauty, Athena had grown up in an atmosphere of incense burnt to woman's loveliness.

She blinked a little at the light and the stranger, and indeed Boris, in his white uniform and high golden collar, his pomatumed curls like a halo in the light, was a striking meteor in the great dim room. Still, safe in her great strength, she asked him—standing, as was her habit, on one leg, like a big stork—of news of his aunt, and the ladies of Closter Seven. She knew very few people, and for these old women, who had given her much good advice, though she had shocked them a little by growing up so unromantically big, she had, Boris thought, the sort of admiration that a peasant's child at a fair has for the skilled and spangled tight-rope dancers. If she marries me, he thought, as he stood and talked to her, his voice sweet as a song, with the fond gaze of the old Count upon her face and his, she will be susceptible to my tricks; but is my married life to be an everlasting fair? And if ever I drop from my rope, will she pick me up, or just turn back and leave?

She bid him let the Prioress know that she had seen her monkey a few nights ago, on the terrace of Hopballehus, sitting upon the socle of Venus's statue, in the place where a small Cupid, now broken, used to be. Talking about the monkey, she asked him if he did not think it curious that her father's solicitor in Poland had a monkey of the same kind, which had also come from Zanzibar. The old Count started to speak of the Wendish idols, from whose country his own family originally came, and of which the goddess of love had the face and façade of a beautiful woman, while, if you turned her around, she presented at the back the image of a monkey. How, he asked, had these wild Nordic tribes come to know about monkeys?

Might there have lived monkeys in the somber pine forests of Wenden a thousand years ago?

"No, that is not possible," said Pastor Rosenquist. "It would always have been too cold. But there are certain symbols which seem to have been the common property of all pagan iconoclasts. It would be worth studying; it might be due to the idea of original sin."

But how, asked Athena, did they know, in the case of that goddess of love, which was the front and which the back?

Boris here ordered his carriage, and took leave of the party. The old Count seemed to be sorry to send him away and repentant of his hardness to a lover. He apologized for the bad weather of Hopballehus, held the youth's hand with tears in his eyes, and told Athena to see him out. Pastor Rosenquist, on the other hand, could not but be pleased by the departure of anyone who looked so much like an angel without being one.

Athena walked out on the terrace with Boris. In the light of his carriage lanterns her big cloak, blowing about her, threw strange shadows upon the gravel, like a pair of large wings. Over the vast lawn, iron gray in the moonlight, the moon herself appeared and disappeared in a stormy sky.

Boris felt at this moment really sorry to be leaving Hopballehus. The chaotic world of the place had reminded him of his childhood, and seemed to him infinitely preferable to the existence of clockwork order which he would find at the convent. He stood a little in silence, near Athena. The clouds were parted, and a few of the constellations of stars stood clear in the sky. The Great Bear preached its lesson: Keep your individuality in the crowd. "Do you ever think of the bear hunt?" Boris asked Athena. The children had not been allowed to take part in it, but they had stolen away together, and had joined the Count's huntsmen, on a very hot July day, high up in the hills. Two spotted dogs had been killed, and he remembered the terrible tumult of the fight, and the quick movements of the huge ragged brown beast within the thicket of firs and ferns, and one glimpse of its furious roaring face, the red tongue hanging out.

"Yes, I do, sometimes," said Athena, her eyes, with his, in the skies, on a stellar bear hunt. "It was the bear which the peasants called the Empress Catherine. She had killed five men."

"Are you still a Republican, Athena?" he asked. "One time you wanted to cut off the heads of all the tyrants of Europe."

The color of Athena's face, in the light of the lamp, heightened. "Yes," she said, "I am a Republican. I have read the history of the French Revolution. The kings and priests were lazy and licentious, cruel to the people, but those men who called themselves 'the Mountain' and put on the red Phrygian bonnet were courageous. Danton was a true patriot, and I should have liked to meet him; so was the Abbé Sieyès." She warmed to her subject in the night air. "I should like to see that place in Paris where the guillotine stood," she said.

"And to wear the Phrygian bonnet?" Boris asked her. Athena nodded shortly, collecting her thoughts. Then, as if meaning to be sure to bring the truth home to him, she broke into some lines of verse, herself, as she went on, carried away by the pathos of the words:

*"O Corse a cheveux plats, que la France était belle
au grand soleil de Messidor.
C'était une cavale indomptable et rebelle,
sans freins d'acier, ni rênes d'or.
Une jument sauvage, à la croupe rustique,
fumant encore du sang des rois.
Mais fière, et d'un pied libre heurtant le sol antique,
Libre, pour la première fois!"*

As Boris drove away from Hopballehus the wind was blowing strong. The moon was racing the heavens behind wild thin clouds; the air was cold. It must be near the freezing point, he thought. His lanterns chased the trees and their shadows and threw them to all sides around him. A large dry branch from a tree was suddenly blown down, and crashed in front of his shying horses. He thought, alone in the dark, of the three people in the hall of Hopballehus, and laughed.

As he drove on, below him in the valley lights leapt up. As if they were playing with him they appeared between the trees, looked him straight in the face and went off again. A large group of lights came in sight, like a reflection, on the earth, of the Pleiades. Those were the lamps of Closter Seven.

And suddenly it came upon him that somewhere something was not right, was quite wrong and out of order. Strange powers were out tonight. The feeling was so strong and distinct that it was as if an ice-cold hand had passed for a moment over his scalp. His hair rose a little upon his head. For a few minutes he was really and genuinely afraid, struck by an extraordinary terror. In this strange turbulence of the night, and the wild life of dead things all around him, he felt himself, his britzska, and his gray and black horses terribly and absurdly small, exposed and unsafe.

As he turned into the long avenue of Closter Seven, his lamps suddenly shone into a pair of glinting eyes. A very small shadow ran across the road and was gone into the deeper black shadows of the Prioress's shrubbery.

On his arrival at the convent he was told that the Prioress had gone to bed. To have, Boris thought, all her strength on hand in the morning.

The supper table was laid for him in his aunt's private dining-room, which she had just lately redecorated. Before it had been white, with ornaments of stucco perhaps a hundred years old. Now it was prettily covered with a wallpaper whose pattern, upon a buff background, presented various scenes of oriental life. A girl danced under a palm tree, beating a tambourine, while old men in red and blue turbans and long beards looked on. A sultan held his court of justice under a golden canopy, and a hunting party on horseback, preceded by its greyhounds and Negro dog-boys, passed a ruin. The Prioress had also done away with the old-fashioned candlesticks, and had the table lighted by tall, brightly modern, Carcel lamps of blue china, painted with pink roses. In the warm and cozy room he supped by himself. Like, he thought, Don Giovanni in the last act of the opera. "Until the Commandante comes,"

his thoughts added on their own. He stole a glance at the window. The wind was still singing outside, but the disquieting night had been shut out by the heavy drawn curtains.

The aunt and the nephew had breakfast together in pleasant harmony, from time to time gazing, within the Prioress's silver samovar, at their own faces curiously distorted. A little shining sun also showed itself therein, for the day that followed the stormy night was clear and serene. The wind had wandered on to other neighborhoods, leaving the gardens of Closter Seven airy and bare.

Boris had recorded to the old lady the happenings at Hopballehus, and she had listened with great content and a deep interest in the fate of her old neighbor and friend. She could hardly refrain from letting her imagination flutter amongst the glories of the boy's future, but it was done so gracefully that the old Count and Athena might have been present.

"I feel, my dear," she said, "that now Athena ought to travel and see a little of the world. When I was her age, Papa took me to Rome and Paris, and I met many celebrities. What a pleasure to a man of talent to accompany that highly gifted child to those places, and show her life."

"Yes," said Boris, pouring himself out some more coffee, "she told me yesterday that she wanted to see Paris."

"Naturally," said the Prioress. "The dear child has never owned a Paris bonnet in her life. At Lariki," she went on, her thoughts running pleasantly to and fro, "there is splendid bear-hunting, and wild boars. I can well imagine your divinity, spear in hand. At Lipnika the cellar is stored with Tokay, presented to one old lord by the Empress Maria Theresa. Athena will pour it out with the generous hand of her family. At Patnov Grabovo are found the famous row of *jets d'eaux* which were constructed by the great Danish astronomer Ole Roemer, the same who made the *grandes eaux* of Versailles."

While they were thus playing about with the happy possi-

bilities of life, old Johann had brought in two letters, which had arrived at the same time, although the one for the Prioress had come by post, and Boris's letter had been brought by a groom from Hopballehus. Boris, on looking up after having read a few lines, noticed the hard and fine little smile on the face of the old lady, absorbed in her reading. She will not smile for long, he thought.

The old Count's letter ran as follows:

I am writing to you, my dear Boris, because Athena refuses to do so. I am taking hold of my pen in deep distress and repentance; indeed I have come to know that desire to cover my head with ashes, of which the old writers talk.

I have to tell you that my daughter has rejected your suit, which last night seemed to me to crown the benefactions of destiny toward my house. She surely feels no reluctance toward this alliance in particular, but she tells me that she will never marry, and that it is even impossible for her to consider the question at all.

In a way it is right that it should be I who write you this letter. For in this misfortune the guilt is mine, the responsibility rests with me.

I, who have had this young life in my hand, have made her strong youth my torchbearer on my descent to the sepulchral chamber. Step by step, as I have gone downwards, her shoulder has been my support and she has never failed me. Now she will not—she cannot—look up.

The peasants of our province have the saying that no child born in wedlock can look straight at the sun; only bastards are capable of it. Alas, how much is my poor Athena my legitimate child, the legitimate child of my race and its fate! She is so far from being able to look straight at the sun, that she fears no darkness whatever, but her eyes are hurt by light. I have made, of my young dove, a bird of the night.

She has been to me both son and daughter, and I have in my mind seen her wearing the old coats of armor of Hopballehus. Too late I now realize that she is wearing it, not as the young

St. George fighting the dragons, but as Azrael, the angel of death, of our house. Indeed, she has shut herself up therein, and for all the coming years of her life, she will refuse to lay it aside.

I have never sinned against the past, but I see now that I have been sinning against the future; rightly it will have none of me. Upon Athena's maiden grave I shall be laying down flowers for those unborn generations in whose faces I had for a moment, my dear child, thought to see your features. In asking your forgiveness I shall be asking the forgiveness of much doomed energy, talent and beauty, of lost laurels and myrtles. The ashes which I strew on my head is theirs! . . .

Boris handed the letter to the Prioress without words, and leaned his chin in his hand to watch her face while she read it. He nearly got more than he asked for. She became so deadly white that he feared that she was going to faint or die, while red flames sprang out on her face as if somebody had struck her across it with a whip. King Solomon, it is known, shut up the most prominent demons of Jewry in bottles, sealed them, and had them sunk to the bottom of the sea. What goes on, down there, of impotent fury! Alike, Boris thought, to the dumb struggles within the narrow and wooden chests of old women, sealed up by the Solomic wax of their education. Probably her sight failed her, and the red damask parlor grew black before her eyes, for she laid down the letter before she could have had time to finish it.

"What! What!" she said in a hoarse and hardly audible voice, "what does the Poet write to you?" She gasped for air, raised her right hand, and shook her trembling forefinger in the air. "She will not marry you!" she exclaimed.

"She will not marry at all, Aunt," said Boris to console her.

"No? Not at all?" sneered the old lady. "A Diana, is she that? But would you not have made a nice little Actaeon, my poor Boris? And all that you have offered her—the position, the influence, the future—that means nothing to her? What is it she wants to be?" She looked into the letter, but in her agony

she was holding it, bewildered, upside down. "A stone figure upon a sarcophagus—in the dark, in silence, forever? Here we have a fantical virgin, en plein dixneuvieme siecle? Vraiment tu n'as pas de la chance! There is no horror vacui here."

"The law of the horror vacui," Boris, who was really frightened, said to distract her, "does not hold good more than thirty-two feet up."

"More than what?" asked the Prioress.

"Thirty-two feet," he said. The Prioress shrugged her shoulders.

She turned her glinting eyes on him, pulling the letter, which she had received by the post, half up from her silk pocket, and putting it back again. "She will have nothing," she said slowly, "and you will give nothing. It seems to me, in all modesty, that you are well paired. I myself, giving you my blessing, have got nothing to say. That was already in the rules of my forefathers: 'Where nothing is, le Seigneur a perdu son droit.' You, Boris, you will have to go back to Court, and to the old Dowager Queen and her Chaplain, by the way you came. For," she added, still more slowly, "where we have entered in, there also we withdraw." These words impressed the old woman herself more than they did her nephew, who had heard them before. She became very silent.

Boris began to feel really uncomfortable, and desired to put an end to the conversation. He could understand quite well that she wanted him to suffer. While she had been happy she had liked to have happy people around her. Now, tortured, she had to surround herself with the sort of substance which was within herself, or, as in the vacuum of which she had been talking, she would be crushed. But in his particular case she had such strong allies in the very circumstances. It was true that he had not yet realized what Athena's refusal would mean to him. If the old woman would go on beating him like this with all her might, all the misery of the last weeks would be returned upon his head again. Suddenly the Prioress turned from him and went up to the window, as if she meant to throw herself out.

In the midst of his own individual distress Boris could not hold his thoughts from the other two persons within this trinity of theirs. Perhaps Athena was walking the pine forests of Hopballehus, her face as wildly set as that of the old woman in her parlor. In his mind he saw himself, in his white uniform, as a marionette, pulled alternately by the deadly determined old lady and the deadly determined young lady. How was it that things meant so much to them? What forces did these impassionate people have within them to make them prefer death to surrender? Very likely he had himself as strong tastes in the matter of this marriage as anybody, but still he did not clench his hands or lose his power of speech.

The Prioress turned from the window and came up to him. She was all changed, and carried no implements of the rack with her. On the contrary she seemed to bring a garland to crown his head. She looked so much lighter, that it was really as if she had been throwing a weight away, out of the window, and was now gracefully floating an inch above the ground.

"Dear Boris," she said, "Athena still has a heart. She owes it to the old playfellow of her childhood to see him, to give him a chance of speaking to her, and to answer him by word of mouth. I will tell her all this, and send the letter back at once. The daughter of Hopballehus has a sense of duty. She will come."

"Where?" asked Boris.

"Here," said the Prioress.

"When?" asked Boris, looking around.

"This evening, for supper," said his aunt. She was smiling, a gentle, even waggish little smile, and still her mouth seemed to get smaller and smaller, like a very dainty little rosebud. "Athena," she said, "must not leave Closter Seven tomorrow without being——" She paused a little, looked to the right and left, and then at him. "Ours!" she said, smiling, in a little whisper. Boris looked at her. Her face was fresh as that of a young girl.

"My child, my dear child," she exclaimed, in a sudden out-

burst of deep, gentle passion, "nothing, nothing must stand in the way of your happiness!"

This great supper of seduction, which was to remain a landmark in the existence of the banqueters, was served in the Prioress's dining-room, and groups of oriental statesmen and dancers watched it from the walls. The table was prettily decorated with camellias from the orangery, and upon the snow-white tablecloth, amongst the clear crystal glasses, the old green wineglasses threw delicate little shadows, like the spirit of a pine forest in summer. The Prioress had on a gray taffeta frock with very rare lace, a white lace cap with streamers, and her large old diamond eardrops and brooches. The heroic strength of soul of old women, Boris thought, who with great taste and trouble make themselves beautiful—more beautiful, perhaps, than they have ever been as young women—and who still can hold no hope of awakening any desire in the hearts of men, is like that of a righteous man working at his good deeds even after he has abandoned his faith in a heavenly reward.

The food was very good, and they had one of the famous carp of Closter Seven, cooked in a way which was kept a secret of the convent. Old Johann poured out the wine very freely, and before they had come to the marzipan and crystallized fruit, the convives of this quiet and dignified meal of an old and a young maid and a rejected lover, were all three of them more than a little drunk.

Athena was slightly drunk in the everyday sense of the word. She had drunk very little wine in her life, and had never tasted champagne, and with the amounts which the hostess of the supper party poured into her, she ought rightly not to have been able to stand on her legs. But she had behind her a long row of ancestors who had in their time lain under all the heavy old oak tables of the province, and who now came to the assistance of the daughter of their race. Still the wine went to her head.

It gave her a rose on each cheek, and very bright eyes, and let loose new forces of invincibility, like a young captain advancing into fire, with a high courage, overbearingly.

Boris, who could drink more than most people, and who till the end remained the most sober of the party, was drunk in a more spiritual way. The deepest and truest thing in the nature of the young man was his great love for the stage and all its ways. His mother, as a maiden, had had the same grand passion, and had fought a mighty combat with her parents in Russia to go onto the stage, and lost it. Her son had no need to fight anybody. He was not dogmatic enough to believe that you must have boards and footlights to be within the theater; he carried the stage with him in his heart. As a very young boy he had played many ladies' rôles in amateur theatricals, and the famous old stage manager Paccazina had burst into tears on seeing him as Antigone, so much did he remind him of Mars. To him the theater was real life. As long as he could not act, he was puzzled by the world and uncertain what to do with it; but as an actor he was his true self, and as soon as he could see a situation in the light of the theater, he would feel at home in it. He did not shirk tragedy, and would perform with good grace in a pastoral, if it were asked of him.

There was something in this way of thinking that he had which exasperated his mother, in spite of her old sympathies for the art, for she suspected him of having in his heart very little preference for the role of a promising and popular young officer. He was, she thought, prepared to give it up at any moment should a role that would appeal more strongly to him present itself, be it that of an outcast or martyr, or, possibly, the tragic part of a youth ascending the scaffold. She had sometimes wanted to cry to him, contrarily to the Old Cordelier: Oh, my child, you fear too little unpopularity, exile and death! Still she could not herself help admiring him in his favorite rôles, nor, even, at times taking up a rôle herself in an ensemble with him, and these performances of theirs might embrace a very wide scale.

Tonight Paccazina would have delighted in him; he had

never played better. Out of gratitude to his godmother, he had resolved to do his best. He had laid his mask with great care in front of his mirror, and had exchanged his uniform for that black color which he considered more appropriate to his part. In itself he always preferred the role of the unhappy, to that of the successful, lover. The wine helped him on, as did the faces of his fellow-players, including old Johann, who wore on his closed countenance a discreet shine of happiness. But he was himself in his own heart carried away by the situation, by the action of the play and by his own talents. He was on the boards, the curtain was up, every moment was precious, and he needed no souffleur.

As he looked at Athena on his left hand, he was pleased with his *jeune première* of the night. Now that they were upon the stage together he read her like a book.

He quite understood the deep impression which his proposal had made upon the mind of the girl. It had not flattered her; it had probably at the moment made her very angry. And the fact that any live person could in this way break in upon the proud isolation of her life had given her a shock. He agreed with her about it. Having lived all his life with people who were never alone, he had become sensitive to her atmosphere of solitude. It had happened to himself, at times, to be entirely alone on a night, dreaming, not of familiar persons or things, but of scenes and people wholly his own creation, and the recollection of such nights he would cherish in his mind. What was now at the moment bewildering the girl was the fact that the enemy approached her in such an extremely gentle manner, and that the offender was asking for consolation. As Boris grew conscious of these feelings of hers, he accentuated the sweetness and sadness of his behavior.

It was probably such a new thing to Athena to feel fear that it had a strange attraction for her. It was doubtful, he thought, whether anything but the scent of some sort of danger could have brought her to Closter Seven on this night. Of what is she afraid? he thought. Of being made happy by my aunt and me? This is this tragic maiden's prayer: From being a success at

court, a happy, congratulated bride, a mother of a promising family, good Lord, deliver me. As a tragic actor of a high standard himself, he applauded her.

The presence of some unknown danger, he felt, was impressed upon the girl by the Prioress's manner toward her. The old woman had been her friend before, but a severe friend. Most of what the girl had said and done had till now been wrong here at the convent, and she had always known that in a benevolent way the old lady had wanted to put her in a cage. Tonight the old eyes dwelt upon her with sweet content, what she said was received with little smiles as gentle as caresses. The cage had been put out of sight. This special sort of incense, offered to her individually, was as unknown to Athena as the champagne itself, and as it was now being burnt at her from her right and her left, she might have felt a difficulty in breathing within the comfortable dining-room of Closter Seven, had she not felt so sure that the door behind her would open, whenever she wanted it, to the woods of Hopballehus.

Boris, who knew more about that door, lifted his eyelashes, soft as mimosa leaves, upon her flaming face. Had her father called her a bird of the night, the eyes of which are hurt by the light? He himself was now walking, slowly, backwards in front of her, carrying some sort of chandelier which twinkled at her. She blinked a little at the light, but she came on.

The Prioress was drunk with some secret joy which remained a mystery to the other convives of her supper party and which glinted in the dark. From time to time she dabbed her eyes or her mouth with her little, delicately perfumed, lace handkerchief.

"My great-grandmother," said the Prioress in the course of the conversation, "was, in her second marriage, ambassadress to Paris, and lived there for twenty years. This was under the Regency. She has written down in her memoirs, how, during the Christmas of 1727, the Holy Family came to Paris and

were known to stay there for twelve hours. The entire building of the stable of Bethlehem had mysteriously been moved, even with the crib and the pots in which St. Joseph had been cooking the spiced beer for the Virgin, to a garden of a small convent, called du Saint Esprit. The ox and the ass were themselves transported, together with the straw upon the floor. When the nuns reported the miracle at the Court of Versailles, it was kept from the public, for they feared that it might pre-*sage* a judgment upon the lewdness of the rulers of France. But the Regent went in great state, with all his jewels on, together with his daughter, the Duchess of Berri, the Cardinal Dubois, and a few selected ladies and gentlemen of the Court, to do homage to the Mother of God and her husband. My great-grandmother was allowed, because of the high esteem in which she was held at Court, to come with them as the only foreigner, and she preserved to the end of her days the furred robe of brocade, with a long train, which she wore on the occasion.

"The Regent had been highly moved and agitated by the news. At the sight of the Virgin he went into a strange ecstasy. He swayed and uttered little screams. You will know that the beauty of the Mother of the Lord, while without equal, was of such a kind that it could awaken no sort of earthly desire. This the Duke of Orleans had never experienced before, and he did not know what to do. At last he asked her, in turn blushing scarlet and deadly pale, to come to a supper at the Berri's, where he would have such food and wine served as had never been seen before, and to which he would make the Comte de Noircy come, and Madame de Parabere.

"The Duchess of Berri was at the time in *grossesse*, and evil tongues had it that this was by her father, the Regent. She threw herself at the feet of the Virgin. 'Oh, dear sweet Virgin,' she cried, 'forgive me. You would never have done it, I know. But if I could only tell you what a deadly, what a damnably dull Court this is!' Fascinated by the beauty of the child she dried her tears and asked for permission to touch it. 'Like strawberries à la Zelma Kuntz.' Cardinal Dubois saluted St. Joseph with extreme politeness. He considered that this saint would

not often be bothering the Almighty with supplications, but when he did so, he would be heard, as the Lord owed him much. The Regent fell upon my great-grandmother's neck, all in tears, and cried: 'She will never, never come. Oh, Madame—you, who are a virtuous woman, tell me what in the world to do.' All this is in my great-grandmother's memoirs."

They talked about travels, and the Prioress entertained them with many pleasant reminiscences of her young days. She was in high spirits, her old face freshly colored under the lace of her cap. From time to time, she made use of a little gesture peculiar to her, of daintily scratching herself here and there with her delicately pointed little finger. "You are lucky, my little friend," she said to Athena. "To you the world is like a bride, and each particular unveiling is a surprise and a delight. Alas, we, who have celebrated our golden wedding with it, are prudent in our inquisitiveness."

"I should like," said Athena, "to go to India, where the King of Ava is now fighting the English General Amhurst. He has, Pastor Rosenquist has told me, tigers with his army, which are taught to fight the enemy along with it." In her excited state of mind she overturned her glass, breaking the stem of it, and the wine flowed over the tablecloth.

"I should like," said Boris, who did not want to talk of Pastor Rosenquist, in whom he suspected an antagonist—beware, his mind told him, of people who have in the course of their lives neither taken part in an orgy nor gone through the experience of childbirth, for they are dangerous people—"to go away and live upon a forlorn island, far from other people. There is nothing for which you feel such a great longing as for the sea. The passion of man for the sea," he went on, his dark eyes on Athena's face, "is unselfish. He cannot cultivate it; its water he cannot drink; in it he dies. Still, far from the sea you feel part of your own soul dying, disappearing, like a jellyfish thrown on dry land."

"On the sea!" the Prioress cried. "Going on the sea! Ah, never, never." Her deep disgust drove the blood to her face until it became quite pink and her eyes shone. Boris was im-

pressed, as he had been before, by the intensity of all women's aversion to anything nautical. He had himself as a boy tried to run away from home to be a sailor. But nothing, he thought, makes a woman flare up in a deadly hostility as quickly as talk of the sea. From the first smell of sea water to the contact with salted and tarred ropes, they loath and shun it and all its ways; and perhaps the church might have kept the sex in order by painting them a maritime, an ashen-gray and frigid waving hell. For fire they fear not, looking upon it as an ally to whom they have long done service. But to talk to them of the sea is like talking of the devil. By the time when the rule of woman shall have made the land inhabitable to man, he will have to take to the sea for peace, for women will rather die than follow him there.

A sweet pudding was served to them, and the Prioress, with a neat gourmandise, picked out a few of the cloves in it and ate them. "This is a very lovable smell and taste," she said, "and the fragrance of a clove grove unbelievably delightful in the midday sun, or when the evening breeze fans the spiced currents of air all over the land. Try a few of them. It is incense to the stomach."

"Where do they come from, Madame my Aunt?" asked Athena, who, in accordance with the tradition of the province, was used to address her in this way.

"From Zanzibar," said the Prioress. A gentle melancholy seemed for a few minutes to sink over her as she sat in deep thought, nibbling at her cloves.

Boris, in the meantime, had been looking at Athena, and had let a fantasy take hold of his mind. He thought that she must have a lovely, an exquisitely beautiful, skeleton. She would lie in the ground like a piece of matchless lace, a work of art in ivory, and in a hundred years might be dug up and turn the heads of old archaeologists. Every bone was in place, as finely finished as a violin. Less frivolous than the traditional old libertine who in his thoughts undresses the women with whom he sups Boris liberated the maiden of her strong and fresh

flesh together with her clothes, and imagined that he might be very happy with her, that he might even fall in love with her, could he have her in her beautiful bones alone. He fancied her thus, creating a sensation on horseback, or trailing her long dresses through the halls and galleries at Court, with the famous tiara of her family, now in Poland, upon her polished skull. Many human relations, he thought, would be infinitely easier if they could be carried out in the bones only.

"The King of Ava," said the Prioress, awakening from the soft reverie into which she had been sunk, "had, in the city of Yandabu—so I have been told by those who have been there—a large menagerie. As in all his country he had none but the elephants of India, the Sultan of Zanzibar presented him with an African elephant, which is much bigger and more magnificent than the rotund, domesticated Indian beasts. They are indeed wonderful animals. They rule the highlands of East Africa, and the ivory traders who sell their mighty tusks at the ivory markets have many tales of their strength and ferocity. The elephants of Yandabu and their herdsmen were terrified of the Sultan's elephants—such as Africa always frightens Asia—and in the end they made the King have him put in chains and a barred house built for him in the menagerie. But from that time, on moonlit nights, the whole city of Yandabu began to swarm with the shades of the elephants of Africa, wandering about the place and waving their large shadow-ears in the streets. The natives of Yandabu believed that these shadow-elephants were able to walk along the bottom of the ocean, and to come up beside the landing place of the boats. No people dared any more be out in the town after dark had fallen. Still they could not break the cage of the captive elephant.

"The hearts of animals in cages," the Prioress went on, "become grated, as upon a grill, upon the shadow of the bars. Oh, the grated hearts of caged animals!" she exclaimed with terrible energy.

"Still," she said after a moment, her face changing, with a

little giggle at the bottom of her voice, "it served those elephants right. They were great tyrants when in their own country. No other animal could have its own way for them."

"And what became of the Sultan's elephant?" Athena asked.

"He died, he died," said the old woman, licking her lips.

"In the cage?" asked Athena.

"Yes. In the cage," the Prioress answered.

Athena laid her folded hands upon the table, with exactly the gesture of the old Count after he had read the Prioress's letter. She looked around the room. The bright color sank from her face. The supper was finished, and they had nearly emptied their glasses of port.

"I think, my Aunt," she said, "that with your permission I will now go to bed. I feel very tired."

"What?" said the Prioress. "Indeed you must not deprive us of the pleasure of your company yet, my nutmeg. I was going to withdraw myself now, but I want you two old friends to have a little talk on this night. Surely you promised Boris that—the dear boy."

"Yes, but that must be tomorrow morning," Athena said, "for I believe that I have drunk too much of the good wine. Look, my hand is not even steady when I put it on this table." The Prioress stared at the girl. She probably felt, Boris thought, that she ought not to have talked about cages, that she had here made her one faux pas of the evening.

Athena looked at Boris, and he felt that he had obtained this slight success: that she was sorry to part from him. Altogether she probably realized that she was making an abrupt retreat from the battle, and regretted it, but under the circumstances she considered it the best move. Boris felt her straight glance as a decoration received before the front. It was not a high decoration, but in this campaign he could not expect more. The girl bid a very kind good night to the Prioress, curtsied to her, and was gone.

The Prioress turned in great agitation to her nephew. "Do not let her go away," she said to him. "Follow her. Take hold of her. Do not waste your time."

"Let us leave her alone," said Boris. "That girl has spoken the truth. She will not have me."

The double rebelliousness in the two young people, the happiness of whose lives she was arranging, seemed to make the Prioress lose speech, or faith in speech. She and Boris remained together in the room for perhaps five minutes more, and it seemed to Boris, when he afterward thought of it, that their intercourse had been carried out entirely in pantomime.

The Prioress stood quite still and looked at the young man, and he really did not know whether within the next seconds she would kill him or kiss him. She did neither. She laughed a little in his face, and fumbling in her pocket she drew out the letter which she had received in the morning, and gave it to him to read.

This letter was a last deadly blow upon the boy's head. It was written by the Prioress's friend, who was the first lady of honor of the Dowager Queen. With deep compassion for his aunt she gave, in very dark colors, the latest news of the capital. His name had been brought up, he had even been pointed out particularly by the Court Chaplain, as one of the corrupters of youth in the case. It was clear that he was at this moment standing upon the brink of an abyss, and that unless he could get this marriage of his through, he should fall over and disappear.

He stood for a little while, his face changed by pain. His whole being rose against being dragged from his star part of the evening, and the elegiac mood of a lover, back to this reality that he loathed. As he looked up to give back the letter to his aunt he found her standing quite close to him. She lifted one hand, keeping her elbow close to her body, and pointed toward the door.

"Aunt Cathinka," said Boris, "you do not know, perhaps, but there is a limit to the effects of will-power in a man."

The old woman kept staring at him. She stretched out her dry delicate little hand and touched him. Her face twisted in a wry little grimace. After a moment she moved around to the back of the room and brought back a bottle and a small glass.

Very carefully she filled the glass, handed it to him, and nodded her head two or three times. In sheer despair he emptied it.

The glass was filled with a liquor of the color of very old dark amber. It had an acrid and rank taste. Acrid and rank were also the old dark-amber eyes of the woman, watching him over the rim of the glass. As he drank, she laughed. Then she spoke. Boris, strangely enough, afterward remembered these words, which he did not understand: "Help him now, you good Faru," she said.

When he had left the room, after a second or two she very gently closed the door after him.

Now this might be the hour for tears, to move the proud beauty's heart, Boris thought. He remembered the tales of that gruesome gang of pilgrims, the old hangmen, who are said to have been wandering over Europe in the twelfth century, visiting the holy places. They carried with them the attributes of their trade: thumbscrews, whips, irons and tongs, and these people, it was said, were able to weep whenever they wanted to. "Yes," the boy said to himself, "but I have not hewed up, flayed and fried alive enough people for that. A few I have, of course, as we all have; but I am only a young hangman for all that—a hangman's apprentice—and the gift of weeping whenever I want to, I have not attained."

He walked down the long white corridor, which led to Athena's room. It had on his left hand a row of old portraits of ladies, and on the right a row of tall windows. The floor was laid with black and white marble tiles, and the whole place looked seriously at him in the nocturnal light. He heard his own footfall, fatal to others and to himself. He looked out of one of the windows as he passed it. The moon stood high in the heavens, clear and cold, but the trees of the park and the lawns lay in a silvery mist. There outside was the whole noble

blue universe, full of things, in which the earth swam onward amongst thousands of stars, some near and others far away. O world, he thought, O rich world. Into his hot brain was thrown a long-forgotten verse:

Athena, my high mistress, on Apollon's bidding,

Here I come to thee.

Much experienced, and tried in many things.

A house, inhabited by strangers, strangely changed.

Thus have I wandered far on land, and on the sea. . . .

He had come to the door. He turned the handle, and went in.

Of all the memories which afterward Boris carried with him from this night, the memory of the transition from the coloring and light of the corridor to that of the room was the longest lasting.

The Prioress's state guest room was large and square, with windows, upon which the curtains were now drawn, on the two walls. The whole room was hung with rose silks, and in the depths of it the crimson draperies of the four-poster bed glowed in the shade. There were two pink-globed lamps, solicitously lighted by the Prioress's maid. The floor had a wine-colored carpet with roses in it, which, near the lamps, seemed to be drinking in the light, and farther from them looked like pools of dark crimson into which one would not like to walk. The room was filled with the scent of incense and flowers. A large bouquet decorated the table near the bed.

Boris knew at once what it was that he felt like. He had at one time, when he had been on a visit to Madrid, been much addicted to bull fights. He was familiar with the moment when the bull is, from his dark waiting-room underneath the tribune, rushed into the dazzling sunlight of the arena, with the many hundred eyes around it. So was he himself in a moment hurled from the black and white corridor, of quiet moonlight, into this red atmosphere. His blood leapt up to his brain; he hardly knew where he was. With failing breath he wondered if this was an effect of the Prioress's love potion. He did not know

either whether Athena was now to be the disemboweled horse, which would be dragged out of the arena, having no more will of its own, or the matador who was to lay him low. One or the other she would be—he could meet nobody else in this place.

Athena was standing in the middle of the room. She had taken off her frock and was dressed only in a white chemise and white pantalettes. She looked like a sturdy young sailor boy about to swab the deck. She turned as he came in, and stared at him.

Boris had been afraid, when imagining the development of the situation, that he would not be able to keep himself from laughing. This risibility of his had before now been his ruin in tender situations. But at the moment he ran no such risk. He was as much in earnest as the girl herself. He had, before he knew where he was, taken hold of one of her wrists and drawn her toward him. Their breaths met and mingled, they were both baring their teeth a little in a sort of perplexed smile or challenge.

"Athena," he said, "I have loved you all my life. You know that without you I shall dry up and shrink, there shall be nothing left of me. Stoop to me, throw me back in the deep. Have mercy on me."

For a moment the light-eyed girl stared at him, bewildered. Then she drew herself up as a snake does when it is ready to strike. That she did not attempt to cry for help showed him that she had a clearer understanding of the situation, and of the fact that she had no friend in the house, than he had given her credit for; or perhaps her young broad breast harbored sheer love of combat. The next moment she struck out. Her powerful, swift and direct fist hit him in the mouth and knocked out two of his teeth. The pain and the smell and taste of the blood which filled his mouth sent him beside himself. He let her go to try for a stronger hold, and immediately they were in each other's arms, in an embrace of life and death.

At this same moment Boris's heart leapt up within him and sang aloud, like a bird which swings itself to the top of a tree and there bursts into song. Nothing happier in all the

world could have happened to him. He had not known how this conflict between them was to be solved, but she had known it; and as a coast sinks around a ship which takes the open sea, so did all the worries of his life sink around this release of all his being. His existence up to now had given him very little opportunity for fury. Now he gave his heart up to the rapture of it. His soul laughed like the souls of those old Teutons to whom the lust of anger was in itself the highest voluptuousness, and who demanded nothing better of their paradise than the capacity for being killed once a day.

He could not have fought another man, were he one of the Einherjar of Valhalla, as he fought this girl. All hunters of big game will know that there is a difference between hunting the wild boar or buffalo, however dangerous they may be, and hunting the carnivora, who, if successful, will eat you up at the end of the contest. Boris, on a visit to his Russian relations, had seen his horse devoured by a pack of wolves. After that, none of the Prioress's raging wild elephants could have called forth the same feeling in him. The old, wild love, which sympathy cannot grant, which contrast and adversity inspire, filled him altogether.

If the shadows of the young women who had clung to him, and out of whose soft arms the fickle lover had torn himself, had been at this moment gathered within the Prioress's rose-colored guest room, they would have felt the pride of their sex satisfied in the contemplation of his mortal pursuit of this maiden who now strove less to escape than to kill him. They tumbled to and fro for a few seconds, and one of the lamps was turned over, fell down, and went out. Then the struggle stabilized itself. They ceased moving and stood clasped together, swaying a little until they found their foothold, the balance of the one so dependent upon and amalgamated with that of the other that neither knew clearly where his own body ended and that of his adversary began. They were breathing hard. Her breath in his face was fragrant as an apple. The blood kept coming into his mouth.

The girl had no feminine inspiration to scratch or bite.

Like a young she bear, she relied on her great strength, and in weight she scored a little. Against his attempts to bend her knees she stood up as straight as a tree. By a sudden movement she got her hands on his throat. He was holding her close to him, her elbows pressed to her sides. Her posture was that of a warrior, clinging to the hilt of his lifted sword, taking a vital vow. He had not known the power of her hands and wrists. Gasping for air, his mouth full of blood, he saw the whole room swaying from one side to another. Red and black flecks swam in front of him. At this moment he struck out for a last triumph. He forced her head forward with the hand that he had at the back of her neck, and pressed his mouth to hers. His teeth grated against her teeth.

Instantly he felt, through his whole body, which was clinging to hers from the knees to the lips, the terrible effect which his kiss had on the girl. She, surely, had never been kissed in her life, she had not even heard or read of a kiss. The force used against her made her whole being rise in a mortal disgust. As he had run a rapier straight through her, the blood sank from her face, her body stiffened in his arms like that of a slowworm, when you hit it. Then all the strength and suppleness which he had been fighting seemed to roll back and withdraw, as a wave withdraws from a bather. He saw her eyes grow dim, her face, so close to his, fade to a dead white. She went down so suddenly that he came down with her, like a drowning man tied to a weight. His face was thrown against hers.

He got up on his knees, wondering if she were dead. As he found that she was not, he lifted her, after a moment, with difficulty, and laid her upon her bed. She was indeed now like a stone effigy of a mail-clad knight, felled in battle. Her face had preserved its expression of deadly disgust. He watched her for a little while, very still himself. He did not know that his own face had the same expression. Had the thought of the Court Chaplain been with him, had the Court Chaplain been with him in the flesh, it could not have stirred him. His spirit had gone almost as definitely as hers. There was no more

effect of the wine in him; none, either, of the Prioress's love philter, which perhaps was not calculated for more than one great effort. He wiped his bleeding mouth and left the room.

Within his own room and bed he came to wonder whether the maiden would, upon her awakening, lament her lost innocence. He laughed to himself in the dark, and it seemed to him that a thin, shrill laughter, like to the shoot of hot steam from a boiling kettle, was echoing his own somewhere in the great house, in the dark.

In the morning the Prioress sent for Boris. He was a little frightened when he saw her, for she seemed to have shrunk. She filled up neither her clothes nor her armchair, and he wondered what sort of night hours had passed over her head in her lonely bed to have squeezed out her strength like this. If all this, he thought, is to go on much longer, there will be nothing left of her. But probably I am looking worse than she myself. Still, she appeared to be in high spirits, and pleased to have got hold of him, as if she had been, somehow, in fear that he might have run away. She told him to sit down. "I have sent for Athena as well," she said.

Boris was content that she did not ask him any questions. His mouth had swelled badly, and hurt him when he had to speak. While waiting he thought of the Vicomte de Valmont, who loved *de passion, les mines de lendemain*. Would the unusual in the circumstances have given this particular morrow an additional charm in the eyes of the matter-of-fact old conqueror of a hundred years ago? Or was it not more likely that he would have considered the romantic values of the situation to be all nonsense? Athena's arrival put an end to his reflections.

She was wearing the same great gray cloak in which he had seen her at Hopballehus, and seemed about to depart. She did indeed so much give the impression of having turned her back on Closter Seven, and of being already away from

it, that he felt somehow left out in the cold. As she looked slowly around, he was deeply struck by her appearance. She seemed to be well on her way to that purified state of the skeleton in which he had imagined her on the night before. She had in reality a death's-head upon her strong shoulders. Her eyes, grown paler in themselves, lay in black holes. She had given up her habit of standing on one leg, as if it now required both her legs to keep her upright and in balance. Confronted by the Prioress, who had still much keen life in her face, she might well have been an accused in the felon's dock, brought straight from the vaults of a dungeon, and from the rack.

Boris at this moment wondered whether it would be better for her that he should tell her all, and assure her that he had done her no harm and would not be likely ever to do her any; in fact, that she had come out of their trial of strength with the honors of war. But he thought it would not. If you prepare yourself, he considered, for lifting a leaden weight, and are deceived by a painted cardboard, your arms come out of joint. In his admiration for her skeleton he was the last person to wish this to happen to her. It was better for her to carry the weight. This maiden, he thought, who could not, who would not, be made happy, let her now have her fill. Like to an artist who has got his statue in the crucible and finds himself short of metals, and who seizes the gold and silver from his treasury, from his table, from his women's caskets to hurl it in, so he had thrown his being, body and soul, into the fatal soundings of her nature. Now she must make out of it what she could.

The Prioress, looking in turn at one and then at the other of the young people, spoke to the girl.

"I have been informed," she said in a dull and hard voice, "by Boris of what has happened here in the night. I do not forgive him. It is a horrible deed to seduce a maiden. But I know that he was goaded on, and also that a candid repentance extenuates the crime. But you, Athena, a girl of your blood and your upbringing—what have you done? You, who must

have known your own nature, you ought never to have come here."

"No, no, Madame my Aunt," said Athena, looking straight at the old woman, "I came here because you invited me, and you told me that it was my duty to come. Now I go away again, and if you do not like to think of me, you need not."

"Ah, no," said the Prioress, "such a thing you cannot do. It is terrible to me that this has happened within the walls of Closter Seven. You know me very little if you think that I shall not have it repaired. Would I show so little friendship toward your father, who is a nobleman? Till this wrong has been expiated, you shall not depart."

Athena first seemed to let this pass for what it was worth and did not answer. Then she asked: "How is it to be repaired?"

"We must be thankful," said the Prioress, "that Boris, guilty as he be, has still a sense of duty left. He will marry you even now." With these words she shot at her nephew a little hard and shining glance, which startled him, as if she had touched him once more.

"Yes, but I will not marry him," said Athena.

The Prioress had by now a highly glowing color in her face. "How is it," she asked in a shrill voice, "that you refuse an honorable offer, of which your father approves, to accept, in the middle of the night, the love that you had rejected?"

"I do not think," said Athena, "that it matters whether a thing happens in the day or the night."

"And if you have a child?" cried the Prioress.

"What!" said Athena.

The Prioress subdued her blazing passion with a wonderful strength of spirit. "I pity you as much as I condemn you," she said. "And if you have a child, unfortunate girl?"

Athena's world was evidently tumbling down to the right and left of her, like a position under heavy gunfire, but still she stood up straight. "What?" she asked. "Shall I have a child from that?"

The old woman looked hard at her. "Athena," she said after

a moment, with the first particle of gentleness which she had, during the conversation, shown toward the girl, "the last thing I wish is to destroy what innocence you may still have left. But it is more than likely that you will have a child."

"If I have a child," said Athena, from her quaking earth thrusting at the heavens, "my father will teach him astronomy."

Boris leaned his elbow on the table and his face in his hand to hide it. For the life of him he could not help laughing. This deadly pale and still maiden was not beaten. A good deal of her deadly pale immobility might be due to the wine and the exertion of the night, and God only knew if they would ever get her into their power. She had in her the magnet, the maelstrom quality of drawing everything which came inside her circle of consciousness into her own being and making it one with herself. It was a capacity, he thought, which had very likely been a characteristic of the martyrs, and which may well have aggravated the Great Inquisitor, and even the Emperor Nero himself, to the brink of madness. The tortures, the stake, the lions, they made their own, and thereby conveyed to them a great harmonious beauty; but the torturer they left outside. No matter what efforts he made to possess them, they stood in no relation to him, and in fact deprived him of existence. They were like the lion's den, into which all tracks were seen to lead, while none came out; or like the river, which drowns blood or filth in its own being, and flows on. Here, just as the conquering old woman and young man had believed the situation to be closing around her, the girl was about to ride away from Closter Seven, like to Samson when he lifted upon his shoulders the doors of Gazi, the two posts, bars and all, and carried them to the top of the hill that is before Hebron. And if she should really become aware of him, would the giant's daughter, he wondered, carry him with her upon the palm of her hand to Hopballehus, and make him groom her unicorns? Again a verse from Euripides ran through his head, and he felt that it must be the wine of the previous night and the whole agitation around him which now caused him, in this

way, to mix up the classics with Scripture and with the legends of his province, for ordinarily he did not do that sort of thing:

*Oh, Pallas, savior of my house, I was bereft
of Fatherland, and thou hast given me a home
again therein.
It shall be said
in Hellas: Lo, the man is an Argive once more,
and dwells again within his father's heritage . . .*

"And what of the honor of your house?" asked the Prioress with a deadly calm. "Who do you think, Athena, of the daughters of Hopballehus, has, before you, been breeding bastards?"

At these words all Athena's blood rushed to her face until it flamed darker than her flaming hair. She took a step toward the old lady.

"My child," she cried in a low tone, but with the lioness's roar deep within her voice, from head to foot the offended daughter of a mighty race, "would my child be that?"

"You are ignorant, Athena," said the old woman. "Unless Boris marries you, what can your child be but a bastard?" Brave as the Prioress was, she probably realized that the girl, if she wished to, could crush her between her fingers. She kept her quick eyes on Boris, who did not feel called upon to interfere in the women's discussion of his child.

Athena did not move. She stood for a few moments quite still. "Now," she said at length, "I will go back to Hopballehus, and speak with my father, and ask his advice about all this."

"No," said the Prioress again, "that is not as it should be. If you tell your father of what you have done, you will break his heart. I will not let that happen. And who knows, if you go now, if Boris will still be ready to marry you when you meet again? No, Athena, you must marry Boris, and you must never let your father know of what has happened here. These two things you shall promise me. Then you can go."

"Good," said Athena. "I will never tell Papa of anything. And as to Boris, I promise you that I shall marry him. But, Madame, my Aunt, when we are married, and whenever I can do so, I shall kill him. I came near to killing him last night, he can tell you that. These three things I promise you. Then I will go."

After Athena's words there was a long pause. The three people in the room had enough in their own thoughts, without speech, to occupy them.

In this silence was heard a hard and sharp knocking upon the pane of one of the windows. Boris now realized that he had heard it before, during the course of their talk, without paying any attention to it. Now it was repeated three or four times.

He became really aware of it at sight of the extraordinary effect which the sound had upon his aunt. She had, like himself, been too absorbed in the debate to listen. Now it attracted her attention and she was immediately struck by a deadly terror. She glanced toward the window and grew white as a corpse. Her arms and legs moved in little jerks, her eyes darted up and down the walls, like a rat that is shut up and cannot get out. Boris turned to the window to find out what was frightening her. He had not known that anything could really do so. Upon the stone sill outside, the monkey was crouching together, its face close to the glass.

He rose to open the window for it. "No! No!" shrieked the old woman in a paroxysm of horror. The knocking went on. The monkey obviously had something in its hand with which it was beating against the pane. The Prioress got up from her chair. She swayed in raising herself, but once on her legs she seemed alert and ready to run. But at the next moment the glass of the window fell crashing to the floor, and the monkey jumped into the room.

Instantly, without looking around, as if escaping from the flames of an advancing fire, the Prioress, gathering up the front of her silk frock with her two hands, ran, threw herself, toward the door. On finding it closed, she did not give herself

time to open it. With the most surprising, most wonderful, lightness and swiftness she heaved herself straight up along the frame, and at the next moment was sitting squeezed together upon the sculptured cornice, shivering in a horrible passion, and grinding her teeth at the party on the floor. But the monkey followed her. As quickly as she had done it, it squirmed up the doorcase and was stretching out its hand to seize her when she deftly slid down the opposite side of the doorframe. Still holding her frock with both hands, and bending double, as if ready to drop on all fours, madly, as if blinded by fright, she dashed along the wall. But still the monkey followed her, and it was quicker than she. It jumped upon her, got hold of her lace cap, and tore it from her head. The face which she turned toward the young people was already transformed, shriveled and wrinkled, and of dark-brown color. There was a few moments' wild whirling fight. Boris made a movement to throw himself into it, to save his aunt. But already at the next moment, in the middle of the red damask parlor, under the eyes of the old powdered general and his wife, in the broad daylight and before their eyes, a change, a metamorphosis, was taking place and was consummated.

The old woman with whom they had been talking was, writhing and disheveled, forced to the floor; she was scrunched and changed. Where she had been, a monkey was now crouching and whining, altogether beaten, trying to take refuge in a corner of the room. And where the monkey had been jumping about, rose, a little out of breath from the effort, her face still a deep rose, the true Prioress of Closter Seven.

The monkey crawled into the shade of the back of the room and for a little while continued its whimpering and twitching. Then, shaking off its misfortunes, it jumped in a light and graceful leap onto a pedestal, which supported the marble head of the philosopher Immanuel Kant, and from there it watched, with its glittering eyes, the behavior of the three people in the room.

The Prioress took up her little handkerchief and held it to her eyes. For a few minutes she found no words, but her de-

portment was as quietly dignified and kindly as the young people had always remembered it.

They had been following the course of events, too much paralyzed by surprise to speak, move, or even look at each other. Now, as out of the terrible tornado which had been reigning in the room, calm was again descending, they found themselves close to each other. They turned around and looked into each other's faces.

This time Athena's luciferous eyes within their deep dark sockets did not exactly take Boris into possession. She was aware of him as a being outside herself; even the memory of their fight was clearly to be found in her clear limpid gaze. But she was, in this look, laying down another law, a command which was not to be broken: from now, between, on the one side, her and him, who had been present together at the happenings of the last minutes, and, on the other side, the rest of the world, which had not been there, an insurmountable line would be forever drawn.

The Prioress lowered the handkerchief from her face, and in a soft and sweeping movement sat down in her large arm-chair. She looked at the young man and the girl.

"Discite justitiam, et non temnere divos," she said.

The King of the Cats¹

BY STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

“But, my dear,” said Mrs. Culverin, with a tiny gasp, “you can’t actually mean—a tail!”

Mrs. Dingle nodded impressively. “Exactly. I’ve seen him. Twice. Paris, of course, and then, a command appearance at Rome—we were in the Royal box. He conducted—my dear, you’ve never heard such effects from an orchestra—and, my dear,” she hesitated slightly, “he conducted with it.”

“How perfectly, fascinatingly too horrid for words!” said Mrs. Culverin in a dazed but greedy voice. “We must have him to dinner as soon as he comes over—he is coming over, isn’t he?”

“The twelfth,” said Mrs. Dingle with a gleam in her eyes. “The New Symphony people have asked him to be guest-conductor for three special concerts—I do hope you can dine

¹From *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*. Published by Rinehart & Co. Copyright, 1929, by Stephen Vincent Benét.

with us some night while he's here—he'll be very busy, of course—but he's promised to give us what time he can spare——”

“Oh, thank you, dear,” said Mrs. Culverin, abstractedly, her last raid upon Mrs. Dingle's pet British novelist still fresh in her mind. “You're always so delightfully hospitable—but you mustn't wear yourself out—the rest of us must do our part—I know Henry and myself would be only too glad to——”

“That's very sweet of you, darling.” Mrs. Dingle also remembered the larceny of the British novelist. “But we're just going to give Monsieur Tibault—sweet name, isn't it! They say he's descended from the Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* and that's why he doesn't like Shakespeare—we're just going to give Monsieur Tibault the simplest sort of time—a little reception after his first concert, perhaps. He hates,” she looked around the table, “large, mixed parties. And then, of course, his—er—little idiosyncrasy——” She coughed delicately. “It makes him feel a trifle shy with strangers.”

“But I don't understand yet, Aunt Emily,” said Tommy Brooks, Mrs. Dingle's nephew. “Do you really mean this Tibault bozo has a tail? Like a monkey and everything?”

“Tommy dear,” said Mrs. Culverin, crushingly, “in the first place Monsieur Tibault is not a bozo—he is a very distinguished musician—the finest conductor in Europe. And in the second place——”

“He has.” Mrs. Dingle was firm. “He has a tail. He conducts with it.”

“Oh, but honestly!” said Tommy, his ears pinkening. “I mean—of course, if you say so, Aunt Emily, I'm sure he has—but still, it sounds pretty steep, if you know what I mean! How about it, Professor Tatto?”

Professor Tatto cleared his throat. “Tck,” he said, putting his fingertips together cautiously. “I shall be very anxious to see this Monsieur Tibault. For myself, I have never observed a genuine specimen of *homo caudatus*, so I should be inclined to doubt, and yet . . . In the Middle Ages, for instance, the

belief in men—er—tailed or with caudal appendages of some sort, was both widespread and, as far as we can gather, well founded. As late as the Eighteenth Century, a Dutch sea-captain with some character for veracity recounts the discovery of a pair of such creatures in the island of Formosa. They were in a low state of civilization, I believe, but the appendages in question were quite distinct. And in 1860, Dr. Grimbrook, the English surgeon, claims to have treated no less than three African natives with short but evident tails—though his testimony rests upon his unsupported word. After all, the thing is not impossible, though doubtless unusual. Web feet—rudimentary gills—these occur with some frequency. The appendix we have with us always. The chain of our descent from the ape-like form is by no means complete. For that matter,” he beamed around the table, “what can we call the last few vertebrae of the normal spine but the beginnings of a concealed and rudimentary tail? Oh, yes—yes—it’s possible—quite—that in an extraordinary case—a reversion to type—a survival—though, of course——”

“I told you so,” said Mrs. Dingle triumphantly. “Isn’t it fascinating? Isn’t it, Princess?”

The Princess Vivrakanarda’s eyes, blue as a field of larkspur, fathomless as the centre of heaven, rested lightly for a moment on Mrs. Dingle’s excited countenance.

“Ve-ry fascinating,” she said, in a voice like stroked, golden velvet. “I should like—I should like ve-ry much to meet this Monsieur Tibault.”

“Well, I hope he breaks his neck!” said Tommy Brooks, under his breath—but nobody ever paid much attention to Tommy.

Nevertheless as the time for Mr. Tibault’s arrival in these States drew nearer and nearer, people in general began to wonder whether the Princess had spoken quite truthfully—for there was no doubt of the fact that, up till then, she had been the unique sensation of the season—and you know what social lions and lionesses are.

It was, if you remember, a Siamese season, and genuine

Siamese were at quite as much of a premium as Russian accents had been in the quaint old days when the Chauve-Souris was a novelty. The Siamese Art Theatre, imported at terrific expense, was playing to packed houses. *Gushuptzgu*, an epic novel of Siamese farm life, in nineteen closely-printed volumes, had just been awarded the Nobel prize. Prominent pet-and-newt dealers reported no cessation in the appalling demand for Siamese cats. And upon the crest of this wave of interest in things Siamese, the Princess Vivrakanda poised with the elegant nonchalance of a Hawaiian water-baby upon its surfboard. She was incomparable. She was everywhere.

. Youthful, enormously wealthy, allied on one hand to the Royal Family of Siam and on the other to the Cabots (and yet with the first eighteen of her twenty-one years shrouded from speculation in a golden zone of mystery), the mingling of races in her had produced an exotic beauty as distinguished as it was strange. She moved with a feline, effortless grace, and her skin was as if it had been gently powdered with tiny grains of the purest gold—yet the blueness of her eyes, set just a trifle slantingly, was as pure and startling as the sea on the rocks of Maine. Her brown hair fell to her knees—she had been offered extraordinary sums by the Master Barbers' Protective Association to have it shingled. Straight as a waterfall tumbling over brown rocks, it had a vague perfume of sandalwood and suave spices and held tints of rust and the sun. She did not talk very much—but then she did not have to—her voice had an odd, small, melodious huskiness that haunted the mind. She lived alone and was reputed to be very lazy—at least it was known that she slept during most of the day—but at night she bloomed like a moonflower and a depth came into her eyes.

It was no wonder that Tommy Brooks fell in love with her. The wonder was that she let him. There was nothing exotic or distinguished about Tommy—he was just one of those pleasant, normal young men who seem created to carry on the bond business by reading the newspapers in the University Club during most of the day, and can always be relied upon at night

to fill an unexpected hole in a dinner-party. It is true that the Princess could hardly be said to do more than tolerate any of her suitors—no one had ever seen those aloofly arrogant eyes enliven at the entrance of any male. But she seemed to be able to tolerate Tommy a little more than the rest—and that young man's infatuated day-dreams were beginning to be beset by smart solitaires and imaginary apartments on Park Avenue, when the famous M. Tibault conducted his first concert at Carnegie Hall.

Tommy Brooks sat beside the Princess. The eyes he turned upon her were eyes of longing and love, but her face was as impassive as a mask, and the only remark she made during the preliminary bustlings was that there seemed to be a number of people in the audience. But Tommy was relieved, if anything, to find her even a little more aloof than usual, for, ever since Mrs. Culverin's dinner-party, a vague disquiet as to the possible impression which this Tibault creature might make upon her had been growing in his mind. It shows his devotion that he was present at all. To a man whose simple Princetonian nature found in "Just a Little Love, a Little Kiss," the quintessence of musical art, the average symphony was a positive torture, and he looked forward to the evening's programme itself with a grim, brave smile.

"Ssh!" said Mrs. Dingle, breathlessly. "He's coming!" It seemed to the startled Tommy as if he were suddenly back in the trenches under a heavy barrage, as M. Tibault made his entrance to a perfect bombardment of applause.

Then the enthusiastic noise was sliced off in the middle and a gasp took its place—a vast, windy sigh, as if every person in that multitude had suddenly said, "Ah." For the papers had not lied about him. The tail was there.

They called him theatric—but how well he understood the uses of theatricalism! Dressed in unrelieved black from head to foot (the black dress-shirt had been a special token of Mussolini's esteem), he did not walk on, he strolled, leisurely, easily, aloofly, the famous tail curled nonchalantly about one wrist—a suave, black panther lounging through a summer

garden with that little mysterious weave of the head that panthers have when they pad behind bars—the glittering darkness of his eyes unmoved by any surprise or elation. He nodded, twice, in regal acknowledgment, as the clapping reached an apogee of frenzy. To Tommy there was something dreadfully reminiscent of the Princess in the way he nodded. Then he turned to his orchestra.

A second and louder gasp went up from the audience at this point, for, as he turned, the tip of that incredible tail twined with dainty carelessness into some hidden pocket and produced a black baton. But Tommy did not even notice. He was looking at the Princess instead.

She had not even bothered to clap, at first, but now—— He had never seen her moved like this, never. She was not applauding, her hands were clenched in her lap, but her whole body was rigid, rigid as a steel bar, and the blue flowers of her eyes were bent upon the figure of M. Tibault in a terrible concentration. The pose of her entire figure was so still and intense that for an instant Tommy had the lunatic idea that any moment she might leap from her seat beside him as lightly as a moth, and land, with no sound, at M. Tibault's side to—yes—to rub her proud head against his coat in worship. Even Mrs. Dingle would notice in a moment.

“Princess——” he said, in a horrified whisper, “Princess——”

Slowly the tenseness of her body relaxed, her eyes veiled again, she grew calm.

“Yes, Tommy?” she said, in her usual voice, but there was still something about her. . . .

“Nothing, only—oh, hang—he’s starting!” said Tommy, as M. Tibault, his hands loosely clasped before him, turned and faced the audience. His eyes dropped, his tail switched once impressively, then gave three little preliminary taps with his baton on the floor.

Seldom has Gluck’s overture to “Iphigenie in Aulis” received such an ovation. But it was not until the Eighth Sym-

phony that the hysteria of the audience reached its climax. Never before had the New Symphony played so superbly—and certainly never before had it been led with such genius. Three prominent conductors in the audience were sobbing with the despairing admiration of envious children toward the close, and one at least was heard to offer wildly ten thousand dollars to a well-known facial surgeon there present for a shred of evidence that tails of some variety could by any stretch of science be grafted upon a normally decaudate form. There was no doubt about it—no mortal hand and arm, be they ever so dexterous, could combine the delicate *élan* and powerful grace displayed in every gesture of M. Tibault's tail.

A sable staff, it dominated the brasses like a flicker of black lightning; an ebon, elusive whip, it drew the last exquisite breath of melody from the woodwinds and ruled the stormy strings like a magician's rod. M. Tibault bowed and bowed again—roar after roar of frenzied admiration shook the hall to its foundations—and when he finally staggered, exhausted, from the platform, the president of the Wednesday Sonata Club was only restrained by force from flinging her ninety-thousand-dollar string of pearls after him in an excess of aesthetic appreciation. New York had come and seen—and New York was conquered. Mrs. Dingle was immediately besieged by reporters, and Tommy Brooks looked forward to the "little party" at which he was to meet the new hero of the hour with feelings only a little less lugubrious than those that would have come to him just before taking his seat in the electric chair.

The meeting between his Princess and M. Tibault was worse and better than he expected. Better because, after all, they did not say much to each other—and worse because it seemed to him, somehow, that some curious kinship of mind between them made words unnecessary. They were certainly the most distinguished-looking couple in the room, as he bent over her hand. "So daringly foreign, both of them, and yet so different," babbled Mrs. Dingle—but Tommy couldn't agree.

They were different, yes—the dark, lithe stranger with the bizarre appendage tucked carelessly in his pocket, and the blue-eyed, brown-haired girl. But that difference only accentuated what they had in common—something in the way they moved, in the suavity of their gestures, in the set of their eyes. Something deeper, even, than race. He tried to puzzle it out—then, looking around at the others, he had a flash of revelation. It was as if that couple were foreign, indeed—not only to New York but to all common humanity. As if they were polite guests from a different star.

Tommy did not have a very happy evening, on the whole. But his mind worked slowly, and it was not until much later that the mad suspicion came upon him in full force.

Perhaps he is not to be blamed for his lack of immediate comprehension. The next few weeks were weeks of bewildered misery for him. It was not that the Princess's attitude toward him had changed—she was just as tolerant of him as before, but M. Tibault was always there. He had a faculty of appearing, as out of thin air—he walked, for all his height, as lightly as a butterfly—and Tommy grew to hate that faintest shuffle on the carpet that announced his presence.

And then, hang it all, the man was so smooth, so infernally, unruffably smooth! He was never out of temper, never embarrassed. He treated Tommy with the extreme of urbanity, and yet his eyes mocked, deep-down, and Tommy could do nothing. And, gradually, the Princess became more and more drawn to this stranger, in a soundless communion that found little need for speech—and that, too, Tommy saw and hated, and that, too, he could not mend.

He began to be haunted not only by M. Tibault in the flesh, but by M. Tibault in the spirit. He slept badly, and when he slept, he dreamed—of M. Tibault, a man no longer, but a shadow, a spectre, the limber ghost of an animal whose words came purringly between sharp little pointed teeth. There was certainly something odd about the whole shape of the fellow—his fluid ease, the mould of his head, even the cut of his fingernails—but just what it was escaped Tommy's intensest cogita-

tion. And when he did put his finger on it at length, at first he refused to believe.

A pair of petty incidents decided him, finally, against all reason. He had gone to Mrs. Dingle's, one winter afternoon, hoping to find the Princess. She was out with his aunt, but was expected back for tea, and he wandered idly into the library to wait. He was just about to switch on the lights, for the library was always dark even in summer, when he heard a sound of light breathing that seemed to come from the leather couch in the corner. He approached it cautiously and dimly made out the form of M. Tibault, curled up on the couch, peacefully asleep.

The sight annoyed Tommy so that he swore under his breath and was back near the door on his way out, when the feeling we all know and hate, the feeling that eyes we cannot see are watching us, arrested him. He turned back—M. Tibault had not moved a muscle of his body to all appearance—but his eyes were open now. And those eyes were black and human no longer. They were green—Tommy could have sworn it—and he could have sworn that they had no bottom and gleamed like little emeralds in the dark. It only lasted a moment, for Tommy pressed the light-button automatically—and there was M. Tibault, his normal self, yawning a little but urbanely apologetic, but it gave Tommy time to think. Nor did what happened a trifle later increase his peace of mind.

They had lit a fire and were talking in front of it—by now Tommy hated M. Tibault so thoroughly that he felt that odd yearning for his company that often occurs in such cases. M. Tibault was telling some anecdote and Tommy was hating him worse than ever for basking with such obvious enjoyment in the heat of the flames and the ripple of his own voice.

Then they heard the street-door open, and M. Tibault jumped up—and jumping, caught one sock on a sharp corner of the brass fire-rail and tore it open in a jagged flap. Tommy looked down mechanically at the tear—a second's glance, but enough—for M. Tibault, for the first time in Tommy's experience, lost his temper completely. He swore violently in some

spitting, foreign tongue—his face distorted suddenly—he clapped his hand over his sock. Then, glaring furiously at Tommy, he fairly sprang from the room, and Tommy could hear him scaling the stairs in long, agile bounds.

Tommy sank into a chair, careless for once of the fact that he heard the Princess's light laugh in the hall. He didn't want to see the Princess. He didn't want to see anybody. There had been something revealed when M. Tibault had torn that hole in his sock—and it was not the skin of a man. Tommy had caught a glimpse of—black plush. Black velvet. And then had come M. Tibault's sudden explosion of fury. Good Lord—did the man wear black velvet stockings under his ordinary socks? Or could he—could he—— But here Tommy held his fevered head in his hands.

He went to Professor Tatto that evening with a series of hypothetical questions, but as he did not dare confide his real suspicions to the Professor, the hypothetical answers he received served only to confuse him the more. Then he thought of Billy Strange. Billy was a good sort, and his mind had a turn for the bizarre. Billy might be able to help.

He couldn't get hold of Billy for three days and lived through the interval in a fever of impatience. But finally they had dinner together at Billy's apartment, where his queer books were, and Tommy was able to blurt out the whole disordered jumble of his suspicions.

Billy listened without interrupting until Tommy was quite through. Then he pulled at his pipe. "But, my dear man——" he said, protestingly.

"Oh, I know—I know," said Tommy, and waved his hands, "I know I'm crazy—you needn't tell me that—but I tell you, the man's a cat all the same—no, I don't see how he could be, but he is—why, hang it, in the first place, everybody knows he's got a tail!"

"Even so," said Billy, puffing. "Oh, my dear Tommy, I don't doubt you saw, or think you saw, everything you say. But, even so——" He shook his head.

"But what about those other birds, werwolves and things?" said Tommy.

Billy looked dubious. "We-ll," he admitted, "you've got me there, of course. At least—a tailed man is possible. And the yarns about werwolves go back far enough, so that—well, I wouldn't say there aren't or haven't been werwolves—but then I'm willing to believe more things than most people. But a wer-cat—or a man that's a cat and a cat that's a man—honestly, Tommy——"

"If I don't get some real advice I'll go clean off my hinge. For Heaven's sake, tell me something to do!"

"Lemme think," said Billy. "First, you're pizen-sure this man is——"

"A cat. Yeah," and Tommy nodded violently.

"Check. And second—if it doesn't hurt your feelings, Tommy—you're afraid this girl you're in love with has—er—at least a streak of—felinity—in her—and so she's drawn to him?"

"Oh, Lord, Billy, if I only knew!"

"Well—er—suppose she really is, too, you know—would you still be keen on her?"

"I'd marry her if she turned into a dragon every Wednesday!" said Tommy, fervently.

Billy smiled. "H'm," he said, "then the obvious thing to do is to get rid of this M. Tibault. Lemme think."

He thought about two pipes full, while Tommy sat on pins and needles. Then, finally, he burst out laughing.

"What's so darn funny?" said Tommy, aggrievedly.

"Nothing, Tommy, only I've just thought of a stunt—something so blooming crazy—but if he is—h'm—what you think he is—it might work——" And, going to the bookcase, he took down a book.

"If you think you're going to quiet my nerves by reading me a bedtime story——"

"Shut up, Tommy, and listen to this—if you really want to get rid of your feline friend."

"What is it?"

"Book of Agnes Repplier's. About cats. Listen.

"There is also a Scandinavian version of the ever famous story which Sir Walter Scott told to Washington Irving, which Monk Lewis told to Shelley and which, in one form or another, we find embodied in the folklore of every land'—now, Tommy, pay attention—"the story of the traveller who saw within a ruined abbey, a procession of cats, lowering into a grave a little coffin with a crown upon it. Filled with horror, he hastened from the spot; but when he had reached his destination, he could not forbear relating to a friend the wonder he had seen. Scarcely had the tale been told when his friend's cat, who lay curled up tranquilly by the fire, sprang to its feet, cried out, "Then I am the King of the Cats!" and disappeared in a flash up the chimney.' "

"Well?" said Billy, shutting the book.

"By gum!" said Tommy, staring. "By gum! Do you think there's a chance?"

"I think we're both in the booby-hatch. But if you want to try it——"

"Try it! I'll spring it on him the next time I see him. But—listen—I can't make it a ruined abbey——"

"Oh, use your imagination! Make it Central Park—anywhere. Tell it as if it happened to you—seeing the funeral procession and all that. You can lead into it somehow—let's see—some general line—oh, yes—'Strange, isn't it, how fact so often copies fiction. Why, only yesterday——' See?"

"Strange, isn't it, how fact so often copies fiction," repeated Tommy dutifully. "Why, only yesterday——"

"I happened to be strolling through Central Park when I saw something very odd."

"I happened to be strolling through—here, gimme that book!" said Tommy, "I want to learn the rest of it by heart!"

Mrs. Dingle's farewell dinner to the famous M. Tibault, on the occasion of his departure for his Western tour, was looked forward to with the greatest expectations. Not only would everybody be there, including the Princess Vivrakanarda, but

Mrs. Dingle, a hinter if there ever was one, had let it be known that at this dinner an announcement of very unusual interest to Society might be made. So everyone, for once, was almost on time, except for Tommy. He was at least fifteen minutes early, for he wanted to have speech with his aunt alone. Unfortunately, however, he had hardly taken off his overcoat when she was whispering some news in his ear so rapidly that he found it difficult to understand a word of it.

"And you mustn't breathe it to a soul!" she ended, beaming. "That is, not before the announcement—I think we'll have that with the salad—people never pay very much attention to salad——"

"Breathe what, Aunt Emily?" said Tommy, confused.

"The Princess, darling—the dear Princess and Monsieur Tibault—they just got engaged this afternoon, dear things! Isn't it fascinating?"

"Yeah," said Tommy, and started to walk blindly through the nearest door. His aunt restrained him.

"Not there, dear—not in the library. You can congratulate them later. They're just having a sweet little moment alone, there now——" And she turned away to harry the butler, leaving Tommy stunned.

But his chin came up after a moment. He wasn't beaten yet.

"Strange, isn't it, how often fact copies fiction?" he repeated to himself in dull mnemonics, and, as he did so, he shook his fist at the library door.

Mrs. Dingle was wrong, as usual. The Princess and M. Tibault were not in the library—they were in the conservatory, as Tommy discovered when he wandered aimlessly past the glass doors.

He didn't mean to look, and after a second he turned away. But that second was enough.

Tibault was seated in a chair and she was crouched on a stool at his side, while his hand, softly, smoothly, stroked her brown hair. Black cat and Siamese kitten. Her face was hidden from Tommy, but he could see Tibault's face. And he could hear.

They were not talking, but there was a sound between them. A warm and contented sound like the murmur of giant bees in a hollow tree—a golden, musical rumble, deep-throated, that came from Tibault's lips and was answered by hers—a golden purr.

Tommy found himself back in the drawing-room, shaking hands with Mrs. Culverin, who said, frankly, that she had seldom seen him look so pale.

The first two courses of the dinner passed Tommy like dreams, but Mrs. Dingle was talking, and even Gabriel will have a time interrupting Mrs. Dingle. At last, though, she paused for breath and Tommy saw his chance.

"Speaking of that," said Tommy, piercingly, without knowing in the least what he was referring to, "Speaking of that——"

"As I was saying," said Professor Tatto. But Tommy would not yield. The plates were being taken away. It was time for salad.

"Speaking of that," he said again, so loudly and strangely that Mrs. Culverin jumped and an awkward hush fell over the table. "Strange, isn't it, how often fact copies fiction?" There, he was started. His voice rose even higher. "Why, only today I was strolling through——" and, word for word, he repeated his lesson. He could see Tibault's eyes glowing at him, as he described the funeral. He could see the Princess, tense.

He could not have said what he had expected might happen when he came to the end; but it was not bored silence, everywhere, to be followed by Mrs. Dingle's acrid, "Well, Tommy, is that quite all?"

He slumped back in his chair, sick at heart. He was a fool and his last resource had failed. Dimly he heard his aunt's voice, saying, "Well, then——" and realized that she was about to make the fatal announcement.

But just then M. Tibault spoke.

"One moment, Mrs. Dingle," he said, with extreme politeness, and she was silent. He turned to Tommy.

"You are—positive, I suppose, of what you saw this afternoon, Brooks?" he said, in tones of light mockery.

"Absolutely," said Tommy sullenly. "Do you think I'd——"

"Oh, no, no, no," M. Tibault waved the implication aside, "but—such an interesting story—one likes to be sure of the details—and, of course, you are sure—quite sure—that the kind of crown you describe was on the coffin?"

"Of course," said Tommy, wondering, "but——"

"Then I'm the King of the Cats!" cried M. Tibault in a voice of thunder, and, even as he cried it, the house-lights blinked—there was the soft thud of an explosion that seemed muffled in cotton-wool from the minstrel gallery—and the scene was lit for a second by an obliterating and painful burst of light that vanished in an instant and was succeeded by heavy, blinding clouds of white, pungent smoke.

"Oh, those horrid photographers," came Mrs. Dingle's voice in a melodious wail. "I told them not to take the flashlight picture till dinner was over, and now they've taken it just as I was nibbling lettuce!"

Someone tittered a little nervously. Someone coughed. Then, gradually the veils of smoke dislimned and the green-and-black spots in front of Tommy's eyes died away.

They were blinking at each other like people who have just come out of a cave into brilliant sun. Even yet their eyes stung with the fierceness of that abrupt illumination and Tommy found it hard to make out the faces across the table from him.

Mrs. Dingle took command of the half-blinded company with her accustomed poise. She rose, glass in hand. "And now, dear friends," she said in a clear voice, "I'm sure all of us, are very happy to——" Then she stopped, open-mouthed, an expression of incredulous horror on her features. The lifted glass began to spill its contents on the tablecloth in a little stream of amber. As she spoke, she had turned directly to M. Tibault's place at the table—and M. Tibault was no longer there.

Some say there was a bursting flash of fire that disappeared

up the chimney—some say it was a giant cat that leaped through the window at a bound, without breaking the glass. Professor Tatto puts it down to a mysterious chemical disturbance operating only over M. Tibault's chair. The butler, who is pious, believes the devil in person flew away with him, and Mrs. Dingle hesitates between witchcraft and a malicious ectoplasm dematerializing on the wrong cosmic plane. But be that as it may, one thing is certain—in the instant of fictive darkness which followed the glare of the flashlight, M. Tibault, the great conductor, disappeared forever from mortal sight, tail and all.

Mrs. Culverin swears he was an international burglar and that she was just about to unmask him, when he slipped away under cover of the flashlight smoke, but no one else who sat at that historic dinner-table believes her. No, there are no sound explanations, but Tommy thinks he knows, and he will never be able to pass a cat again without wondering.

Mrs. Tommy is quite of her husband's mind regarding cats—she was Gretchen Woolwine, of Chicago—for Tommy told her his whole story, and while she doesn't believe a great deal of it, there is no doubt in her heart that one person concerned in the affair was a perfect cat. Doubtless it would have been more romantic to relate how Tommy's daring finally won him his Princess—but, unfortunately, it would not be veracious. For the Princess Vivrakanarda, also, is with us no longer. Her nerves, shattered by the spectacular denouement of Mrs. Dingle's dinner, required a sea-voyage, and from that voyage she has never returned to America.

Of course, there are the usual stories—one hears of her, a nun in a Siamese convent, or a masked dancer at Le Jardin de ma Soeur—one hears that she has been murdered in Patagonia or married in Trebizond—but, as far as can be ascertained, not one of these gaudy fables has the slightest basis of fact. I believe that Tommy, in his heart of hearts, is quite convinced that the sea-voyage was only a pretext, and that by some unheard-of means, she has managed to rejoin the formidable M. Tibault, wherever in the world of the visible or

the invisible he may be—in fact, that in some ruined city or subterranean palace they reign together now, King and Queen of all the mysterious Kingdom of Cats. But that, of course, is quite impossible.

Mr. Limpet¹

BY THEODORE PRATT

The things that went on inside Mr. Limpet's head were, comparatively speaking, much larger and on a much broader scale than Mr. Limpet himself.

Once, inadvertently soliloquizing, and addressing himself more than his wife, Mr. Limpet had uttered one of his secret thoughts.

"I'm sure," he murmured, "that the Devonian period in the Paleozoic era, when all forms of life were aquatic, was the most important——"

His wife had brought him up sharply, as she usually did about almost everything. "Henry Limpet," she told him severely, "I hope you're not going crazy. You sound it."

Mr. Limpet wondered what Bessie would think if she could read his thoughts now.

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They had taken the subway from Brooklyn with their best friends, the Stickles, and come to Coney Island. At present they stood on a little pier that jutted over the water, and with others were looking at a school of fish which swam some fifteen feet below. An airplane flew overhead as they watched the fish.

"They don't look good to eat to me," Bessie said. Mrs. Limpet was apt to be practical-minded even about frivolous matters.

"You'd eat them fast enough if you could get them," George Stickle stated.

Mr. Stickle, who was third engineer on a United States Navy destroyer, was in the habit of speaking his mind without reservation. He spoke it through his plentiful black mustache, at which he chewed when he was baffled or particularly thoughtful.

"Oh, I see them!" cried Clara Stickle. Mrs. Stickle was a blonde second-edition Mrs. Stickle, somewhat younger than her husband, and perhaps on that account conditioned to be a bit slow in perception.

It was now Mr. Limpet's turn to make an observation. The airplane swooped low, making loud noises all about. As if to get away from it, Mr. Limpet leaned over the railing of the pier, and looked intently down his long nose through his eye-glasses. The racket the plane was making would not have permitted him to be heard, so he said nothing.

It didn't, however, prevent his thoughts from rushing through him. His thoughts were these:

I'd like to jump down there. I'd like to join the fish. I'd like to be one of them. I wish I were a fish.

Naturally these were not the broad-scale thoughts that usually went through Mr. Limpet's head.

His present ideas were rather the result of the others. Both the fish and the airplane brought them forward. Each was a vital part of the big thoughts with which Mr. Limpet was mostly taken up nowadays.

"Come!" said Mrs. Limpet. She was ready to go, to leave the pier and investigate the joys of Coney Island.

If Mr. Limpet had obeyed her command instantly, as he usually did, a great many things would not have happened. The world might be a much sadder place and Mr. Limpet would not have obtained the wish he had so recently expressed.

Especially what occurred would not have come about if Mr. Limpet had not just then reached the frenzied height of the great things going through his head.

These thoughts of his were mostly concerned with what the world was coming to. There was war upon the earth, a great deal of war on most of the globe's surface. It was almost like a fashion that had been enthusiastically adopted by nearly everyone.

His own country had not yet entered the war, but was simply preparing for it. This did not limit Mr. Limpet's broad perspective to such minor things as the resultant rising cost of living, increased taxes, the government's billions of dollars of debts, or even the generally accepted notion that after this war was over the last depression would seem like a boom period.

Such things Mr. Limpet took into consideration. But mainly he went far beyond them. Because of his single vice—that of reading in books—it was his suspicion that mankind had reached the topmost stair in its evolution and would now go down the other side with a rush.

That was where the Devonian period of the Paleozoic era came in. Mr. Limpet didn't believe that all forms of life would become extinct. At the end of the Paleozoic era man in his own form of an amphibian had climbed out of the ocean. From the fish form he had evolved that far, and went on to stand up on two legs and develop his brain. Man wasn't much more than a talking fish. His actions lately tended to illustrate this.

After human beings now went the way of the dodo, there would still be left the fish in the sea and the animals on the earth. But from the animals there could not very well come man again, for they had obviously developed as far as they could. It would take a new form, a reclimbing of something

else from the unknown variation of life in the sea, to start up human beings once more, perhaps a different species—Mr. Limpet hoped a wiser one—but *Homo sapiens* just the same.

That is why Mr. Limpet believed so thoroughly in, and admired, the Devonian period.

A second one would come, not overnight, not in a few years, not perhaps in a single million years, but ultimately he was sure the time was bound to arrive when another creature would crawl from the salt sea and take to the land to become man again.

The thought was a source of comfort to Mr. Limpet when occasionally the wave of the present future swept over him to light a queer flash in his consciousness. Sometimes he wished that he could be a part of the new period to come, instead of a part of the last of the product of the modern one.

Having such bizarre ideas, it was only natural for Mr. Limpet to look with favor upon the sea and all things in it. This was also motivated by the fact that Mr. Limpet somewhat resembled a fish.

His pop-eyes and his long, lean nose, poking out in front of him sharply, caused this more than anything else. As a boy he had been taunted with it by other boys, and his nickname was "Fish." For a long time he bitterly resented this. It wasn't until later years, when he had settled down and married Mrs. Limpet—or at least settled down as much as anyone could when married to Mrs. Limpet—that he ceased to look upon the appellation with misgiving. Now, feeling and believing as he did, he was very nearly proud of it. He almost wished that his wife, or Mr. Stickle, or someone, would again call him "Fish!" But no one ever did.

Thus, because the very presence and sight of fish fascinated him, Mr. Limpet did not immediately obey when his wife called: "Come," on the pier.

Other things piled in on Mr. Limpet. Bessie that day had refused to permit him to go swimming, simply because he couldn't swim and because the last time he had tried he was nearly drowned. Clara Stickle had been particularly silly

and irritating. Mr. Stickle had been troublesome on the subway coming out. When Mr. Limpet wanted to know something about his destroyer, the *Starbright*, Mr. Stickle had replied that the answer was a military secret. Mr. Limpet was sure that this was not the case at all, that Mr. Stickle was merely trying to be important.

Most of all was that combination of the airplane and the fish. The noise of the plane, swooping still lower, was maddening in his ears. Mr. Limpet bent even lower to look at the fish. He felt drawn to them, almost irresistibly, and suddenly he became so possessed with the noise of the plane and the sight of the fish swimming slowly, beckoningly, that he felt a terrible compulsion to join them.

The last Mr. Limpet heard Bessie say was: "Look out, Henry, you're leaning too far. . . ."

But by that time Mr. Limpet was on his way down to the fish.

The first few seconds after he entered the water were never altogether clear to Mr. Limpet.

He knew that he felt very wet. He had a dim idea that he should be struggling, but he found no necessity to do so. Outside of being wet, which didn't really seem to bother him, he felt quite comfortable.

He remembered seeing Mr. Stickle, who was quite wet too, and strangely with his coat and shoes off. He had stared straight into the face of his friend, but Mr. Stickle gave no sign of recognition. He watched, from a little distance, while Mr. Stickle rose to the surface and then came down again, as if searching for something.

Other men came, too, swimming about and searching. Mr. Limpet thought that someone must have been drowned, but he could see nobody about.

After a time the men, with Mr. Stickle, went away. Mr. Limpet followed them up with his eyes, watching Mr. Stickle mount the wooden stairs of the pier at which boats landed. He

saw Bessie and witnessed her fall and, in a moment, the scene as she was being led away.

That was when Mr. Limpet realized.

At least he half understood then, for he rose to go after Bessie and tell her he was all right. He found himself in the air, so high that he could make out the retreating figure of his wife. He seemed very free and light until, with a smack, he landed in the water again.

For a moment Mr. Limpet was very still.

The full realization, when it came, stunned him. He felt horribly frightened. He quivered and trembled.

It wasn't possible, he told himself.

It simply wasn't possible.

In a minute he would come out of this nightmare.

He waited for the minute to pass, but he didn't come out of it.

Perhaps, he thought, it was one of his day-dreams, when he lost himself in fancy and accomplished great deeds, deeds that Mr. Stickle should perform on his destroyer but never did. This might be just one of those flights of imagination, a deeper one which was difficult to leave. But he didn't leave it.

Then Mr. Limpet was most confused. He began to have wild thoughts that he lived in fourth-dimensional time in which there was no difference at all between a man and a fish.

To prove it to himself, and because he was very curious, too, he twisted his neck to look. It wasn't as easy twisting his neck as it had been before. He didn't seem to have any real neck, but simply a continuation of his body to his head. Nevertheless, he could turn sufficiently to see himself pretty well.

There he was. It was true, all right.

He gulped, and then it struck him, with panic, that he breathed water instead of air. He expected to strangle at once, but instead he kept right on breathing. Not through his nose, but through his—his—— It was a moment before Mr. Limpet could say it to himself. Through his gills.

He stole another look at himself. He judged he was between five and six feet long, nearer five than six. That was just about

his regular length. He was long and slender, on the thin side. He rather admired his tail; it was nice and wavy, and his fins were pretty, too, with quite a bit of blue in them. And they moved gracefully and delicately.

Mr. Limpet realized something else. He was swimming. Or at least he was moving his fins just enough to keep himself several feet from the bottom. He could swim after all. He wanted to tell Bessie. But she wasn't here.

He felt very lonely. Except for a sea slug humping its way along over the mud, there was no other living thing in sight. He was separated from his own world and he was another kind of creature entirely than he had been all his life.

What was he to do now?

How was he to get along?

A few big tears came out of Mr. Limpet's eyes and slid down his—not his cheeks, but his gill covers. Then they ceased and Mr. Limpet stared about.

It was surprising how clearly he could see. He had understood that fish didn't have very good eyesight, that they "saw" as much with their delicate hearing, by being sensitive to vibration, as they did with their eyes. But Mr. Limpet could see very clearly indeed; the water to him was not much different from clean air.

It was a moment before he understood the reason for this. He still had his eyeglasses. There they were, perched on the end of his long nose just as they had been before. He was exceptionally glad of them. They made him feel much more at home. They constituted a heart-warming tie to the world he had left.

He wondered if he could really swim. He tried it. He gave his tail a flip and at once found himself rushing through the water at incredible speed. He coasted, using his tail to turn himself this way and that, finally slowing down in circles. This made him a little dizzy, but it was delightful.

Yet it wasn't enough to comfort Mr. Limpet entirely. There was still the fact of his awful metamorphosis. He wasn't at all sure he liked it. He yearned to be a human being again.

But there didn't seem to be anything Mr. Limpet could do about this. He would have to make the best of it.

Now that he was a fish, he wondered what fish did and where they went. He didn't know, never having been a fish before—except, of course, he was descended from the fish form many million years ago. Perhaps some dormant instinct would come to life in him. He waited for it to come, to help him.

When none did, Mr. Limpet decided that the first thing to do was to choose a place to go.

It struck him almost at once that he had always wanted to go to Florida. Now was his chance.

Through the water and up over the surface into the air, Mr. Limpet took a last look at Coney Island. Night was descending, and he could make out the Ferris wheels because lights were springing up on them as they turned. Mr. Limpet had expected to take a ride on them. Now he never would again. He felt sorry at leaving them, afraid of setting out on such a long journey, all alone and in a new element.

Finally his qualms quieted, and with another vigorous flip of his tail he sent himself streaking through the water.

Mr. Limpet learned a great deal on his way to Florida.

The first thing he learned was that, having decided upon a destination, there was no confusion in him about which direction to take.

That seemed to come to him quite naturally. Of course, as a matter of scientific navigation, he couldn't be sure that he would end up in Florida. But he was so certain of it in his own mind that he didn't even question it. Especially as the water became warmer and warmer as he went along.

The second thing he learned was quite disturbing to him.

Other fish, when they saw him, would have nothing to do with him. They swam quickly away. Perhaps, Mr. Limpet thought, it was the eyeglasses. None of them had eyeglasses, and they must be frightened.

With a little more experience, however, he knew it was more than this.

The other fish weren't frightened by him; they were shunning him. Schooling happily together, they would have none of Mr. Limpet. When he tried the experiment of joining several schools, they whipped away, leaving him alone.

Mr. Limpet then realized that fish schooled only with their kind, and the schools he had seen were not his kind.

But what kind was he? He didn't know himself because, while he could see most of his body, he couldn't see his face at all and therefore was unable to determine what kind of fish he was or what he looked like.

Eagerly then he tried to join other groups so that he could find out just what he was. But all of them avoided him.

Mr. Limpet wondered how a fish went about looking at himself in a mirror. He longed for a glass that would show his reflection.

He had been worried about being attacked by other, larger fish, and now his worry became a horrible fact. Bigger fish than he not only would not allow him to join them, but wanted to kill him. They seemed to object, strenuously, to Mr. Limpet's being in the sea. Also they appeared to be perpetually and ravenously hungry.

Mr. Limpet discovered these things when a tremendous shark slashed directly toward him. It seemed to come at him like a locomotive, and just as fast. Mr. Limpet was transfixed with fear. All he could do for a moment was to stay still, paralyzed by this danger. Then, just before the monster reached him, with its jaws already open to gobble him up, Mr. Limpet cried out.

He was startled himself by the sound of his voice, which filled the water with a thrumming vibration, like the singing note of a deep-toned jew's-harp.

Mr. Limpet didn't see the shark disappear. He knew only that he was still alive and all in one piece, and that the shark wasn't there any more.

To be certain that he was safe from further attacks like this,

he tried out his voice on other fish, small and large. Invariably they scuttled away, scared to death. Even several powerful porpoises thought better on hearing the sound he was able to give out, and left his vicinity hurriedly.

It was a relief to know this. He would be safe except for an attack from the rear which he might not see.

But even this Mr. Limpet felt reasonably sure would never happen. For his greatest discovery of all was the fact that he appeared to have both better vision—with his eyeglasses—and much better hearing than any other fish possessed. He could make out even small objects for over a hundred yards ahead. And when it came to any noise in the ocean, he was keenly alert to it long before he could see it.

He could hear the throbbing of a ship's engine and the beat of its propeller from miles away. The noise of these was so great to Mr. Limpet that he could barely stand being close to them, when they sounded like thunder to him.

One night he made out, from far away, a curious kind of throbbing that was different from any other sound he had heard. Deciding to investigate, he swam toward it. When he reached it, there on the surface lay a submarine. Mr. Limpet was sure it was a German submarine, and that it was charging its batteries preparatory to getting at some devilish work.

It made Mr. Limpet very angry. He wished he could tell someone about this. He would like to inform Mr. Stickle. But he didn't see how he could.

Mr. Limpet took a strong stand in the matter of eating.

When first he felt hunger, it was with reluctance that he realized that part of the diet of a fish is other fish. But Mr. Limpet could not bring himself to kill anything. He decided to restrict himself to seaweed, ocean lettuce, and various other vegetable matter that grew profusely all about him.

He was a little squeamish at first about how these would taste and how his stomach would react to them. His first nibble at them was very tentative. Then he found that they were quite delicious and that they agreed with him very well indeed.

On his third day out, Mr. Limpet saw a newspaper floating

slowly downward. A slight movement of his tail brought him to it. He glanced at the big black headlines which recounted another episode in the long roster of Adolf Hitler's achievements.

When, Mr. Limpet wanted to know, were we going to get smart and get into this thing? What were we waiting for? Raging, Mr. Limpet wanted to write a letter to his Congressman, but down here in the sea he couldn't very well do this. And if his Congressman learned from whom such a letter came, it would probably make no impression at all. Mr. Limpet felt quite helpless.

He went on to read the other news, lifting a wary eye now and again for sharks, which he had come to enjoy bellowing at and frightening away.

He read all the news on the first page of the newspaper, following it as it slowly floated down. Then, with a little trying, he found that he could turn the pages by gently nosing them and swimming with one to open it out.

On page fourteen, well in the back of the paper, he was brought up short by seeing his own name.

With great interest Mr. Limpet read his obituary. It consisted of three lines:

"Henry Limpet, 38, a bookkeeper residing at 1313 Gargoyle Ave., Brooklyn, yesterday afternoon fell or jumped from a pier at Coney Island. The body was not recovered. Limpet is survived by his wife."

Mr. Limpet felt conflicting emotions.

First it made him rather sad.

Then, for an instant, he was amused.

Following that, he was reflective. Few men had ever read their own death notices. He had imagined himself doing this, and then leading an adventurous life under another name, to return home one day a romantic hero to impress all who had known him before.

Well, now at least he was a fish. And Mr. Limpet was beginning to get the impression that he was quite a fish.

One thing about his obituary bothered him. That was the

statement that he either "fell or jumped." Mr. Limpet wondered if he had actually jumped. He didn't know for sure. All he had felt was that strange compulsion, and the next thing he knew clearly was that he was a very changed manifestation of life.

Florida, when he reached it, was all that Mr. Limpet had ever dreamed about it.

He went in close, riding the breakers, to look at it. There were tall, waving palm trees with coconuts on them. On the broad white sandy beach there were gay umbrellas and people cavorting in happy fashion. Some of them were in the water.

Mr. Limpet thought Florida looked so good that he regretted not being a human being again. He had begun to take pride in being what he was, but the sight of these people shook his consolation with his lot.

He nosed in closer to look, coming to a young man and a girl playing together in the water. The girl was very pretty, and her extremely brief bathing suit left her next door to being without any covering at all. The sight of her made Mr. Limpet feel a good deal the way he had felt on the pier. That was why, with pure impulsiveness, he did what he did.

He didn't realize what he was doing until after it was done, when the girl turned angrily on her companion and demanded: "What do you think you're doing?"

"I didn't touch you," the young man replied.

Only then did Mr. Limpet feel guilty. He wondered what Bessie would think. Burning with shame, he began to swim hurriedly away.

His shame didn't last long, and he didn't go far away. Suddenly, incredibly, Mr. Limpet realized that he had heard the girl and the young man speak. He could understand the speech of human beings!

On the way down the Florida coast Mr. Limpet saw a number of fishing boats. Once he had wanted to try deep-sea fish-

ing. Now he was on the other end of the stick, or, rather, the other end of the fishing rod.

He scorned this obvious trap. He couldn't understand how any self-respecting fish would fall for it. Certainly they could see, with half an eye, that the bait being drawn along through the water consisted of no natural food.

But evidently they couldn't. Mr. Limpet noted three of his fellows following baits. They were getting ready to grab them and be hooked by the vicious barbs concealed so cunningly. Then Mr. Limpet realized that their eyesight and their knowledge were not nearly so good as his.

Just as the first was about to strike a bait, Mr. Limpet let out a great yell. The three fish, startled out of their wits, vanished. From the boat there came curses. Mr. Limpet smiled.

Off Miami, when he arrived there, men were fishing from a great number of boats. Mr. Limpet had a busy time going from one to another giving his warning.

Fishing off the Florida coast was very bad for some time.

Only at great intervals, and then far away from the regular grounds, was much caught. Tourists were disappointed. Charter captains were downcast and many of them went into bankruptcy. Articles in the newspapers stated that it looked as if the fish had deserted the waters for good. A big business faced abject failure.

Mr. Limpet, that first night in Miami, had realized two more things. He was free and able, as he never would have been before, to visit the farthest ends of the world. He could see everything he wanted to see except, perhaps, for certain things inland. But he could roam the seven seas.

The prospect was exceptionally inviting. He decided to start out on it right away.

As he was leaving Biscayne Bay through Government Cut, however, another thought occurred to him.

It would be selfish of him to spend his life being a mere sightseer. With his keen eyesight and learning as a fish with human intelligence, he could save hundreds, even thousands, of lives. It was his duty, clearly, to stay around Miami and

carry on this good work. In addition, it might gain him the friendship of some of his fellows.

In this Mr. Limpet was bitterly disappointed.

No matter how many he saved, no matter if he saved the same foolish ones over and over again, none of the other fish would have the slightest communion with him. Instead of offering gratitude to their savior, they sedulously avoided him.

He was acutely miserable.

The terrible thought came to him that, having been created in such a mysterious fashion, he might be the only specimen of his kind of fish in existence in all the waters of the world. If this happened to be true, then he could never find another with whom to commune. For the rest of his days he would be ostracized, set apart as a freak no other living thing would associate with.

This thought was superseded by another even more horrible. In his travels so far, among all the fish he had seen and saved, there had not been another like himself. The reason he was shunned, the only reason those he saved did not speak to him, was that they were not his kind. It struck him forcibly that the law of the sea kept them from doing this, no matter how much they were indebted to him.

Mr. Limpet streaked across the Gulf Stream to the inner edge, where the few fishing boats still in operation were trolling.

He arrived no more than in time. Fifty yards from the stern of one of the boats a fish struggled unhappily in the water. It slashed back and forth so fast that Mr. Limpet couldn't make out its appearance clearly. But there was no doubt that it was in great distress.

It tried to jump, in order to throw the stinging barb buried through its jaw, but it was too weak and exhausted to get into the air. Now it was being drawn toward the boat.

Mr. Limpet wasted no time. He knew what to do in such an emergency. With lightning speed he sliced through the water. He met the line with his mouth wide open. All Mr. Limpet felt was a slight tug as his sharp teeth cut the line cleanly.

From the boat he heard howls of disgust. "Did you see that?" one of the party asked. "They're trained to save each other."

Mr. Limpet was not concerned with how the fishermen felt. He was very solicitous about how the fish felt.

His fast run had carried him a good way off. From a distance he saw the fish slowly shaking its head. Then, with renewed vigor at no longer having to fight the line, it shook harder. The hook, attached to the piece of line, fell away and sank.

Mr. Limpet swam closer.

At first he couldn't believe his eyes.

The fish was another just exactly like himself.

But not quite exactly.

It was undoubtedly the same species. The differences were only slight, and those of a gentle nature. It was a little more slim than he, except for the stomach, which had a slight curve downward. The pink patches on its face were more brilliant, and lovely because of this. Its fins were more delicate, and its eyes were softer. But in its tail Mr. Limpet could see a significant variation that made his heart beat wildly. Here the colors were bright and strong, though blending in the most beautiful combinations he had ever seen. As it waved gently, the colors changed, undulating exquisitely as they played upon the spectrum.

It was this that made Mr. Limpet know he had met a female of his own kind.

She gazed at Mr. Limpet, and he stared back, holding his breath. He remembered his former disappointments and wanted to take no chance with this opportunity.

Her voice was musical when she spoke. "Thank you," she said simply and directly. She looked at him with distinct appreciation.

Mr. Limpet could not make his own voice work.

"That was very nice of you," she told him. "And clever."
Still Mr. Limpet could not reply.

"You saved my life," she said.

Only then was Mr. Limpet able to croak with happiness:
"You're speaking to me."

She looked about. "I don't see anyone else to speak to."

"I mean," Mr. Limpet stuttered, "you—you don't dislike me?"

She looked at him now with an expression that Mr. Limpet could not entirely credit. It was not coy, nor arch, nor what might be called flirting. It was of unabashed admiration.

"On the contrary," she stated.

"What's your name?" Mr. Limpet managed to ask.

"Name?" she repeated. "I don't know what you mean."

"What people," Mr. Limpet said, "what fish call you by."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"I'll call you Ladyfish," Mr. Limpet said. "My name is Limpet. Hen——"

Before Mr. Limpet could tell her his whole name, Ladyfish darted to him. She came directly to his side, where she worked her fins rapidly and quivered. "All right, Limpet," she said softly, "shall we go?"

"Go?" asked Mr. Limpet. "Go where?"

"Why, to the breeding grounds," she replied. "After what you did for me, I——" Ladyfish dropped her eyes.

Mr. Limpet thought he would explode. One energy within him wanted to detonate itself with joy and passion and high singing. But at the very same time another energy was touched off in his remembrance of Bessie.

He didn't know what to do. He had been married for nearly twenty years to Bessie and now here was a young, beautiful female, the first creature that had even spoken to him for a long, bitter time, wanting to . . .

It was quite a chore for Mr. Limpet to compose himself. Bessie nearly lost out right there. "Do you mind," he asked, trying to keep his voice calm, "if we stay here for a moment?"

"If you wish."

It made the situation even more difficult to have her so gracious and agreeable. After Bessie, this was a shock that was nearly overpowering. Yet there was still Bessie. Mr. Limpet could not get away from her.

Ladyfish quivered beside him. "What," she inquired, "is that on your nose?"

"Those are my eyeglasses," he explained.

"Were you born that way?" she asked. "I mean, I don't object to them. I rather like them. They make you look distinguished."

Mr. Limpet was about to delineate the history of his eyeglasses. Then he thought better of it. Could he make Ladyfish comprehend the truth about himself? If he did, would it alienate her from him to know that he had not been born one of their kind?

He contented himself with saying that through his eyeglasses he could see a long way off. "Do you see that barracuda coming straight in front of us?" he asked Ladyfish.

She looked in some alarm, for the savage barracuda, the tiger of the sea, with its propensity for killing merely for the sake of killing, was the most dreaded and undesirable citizen in the ocean. It was far worse than sharks, which were often blamed for its ruthless depredations.

Ladyfish could not see this one. She stopped quivering and said with some censure: "Limpet, I'm surprised at you for saying such a thing."

"Watch," he told her.

They watched, and in a moment the long, sinuous form of a barracuda came through the water. Its movement was dainty and demure, but this was a furtive grace, simply to belie its real nature, which could be seen by noting its jaws. These were extended and ugly, and held open to show, with pure exhibitionism, its needle-sharp rows of dog-teeth.

Ladyfish began to quiver again. "You're wonderful," she said. But she didn't like the barracuda's heading for them and advised that they had better start escaping.

Mr. Limpet told her not to be frightened by the noise he was

now going to make. He sent his thrumming sound through the water.

The next instant, where the barracuda had been, there was only a blur of swirling water. The lustful murderer had disappeared as suddenly and completely as a bursting soap-bubble.

Ladyfish, who had jumped slightly away at the noise Mr. Limpet made, even after his warning, now came back and snuggled close to him. She quivered ecstatically, sending waves of thrills through Mr. Limpet. "You're very wonderful," she whispered. "Shall we go?"

If Mr. Limpet had ever wanted, with excruciating rapture, to do anything in his life, it was now to go with Ladyfish. But he could not thrust out the restraining thought of Bessie. The image of her face loomed large before him, filling the whole sea. At his having the very thought of what he would like to do, the image seemed to frown so deeply that the creases in its forehead looked like valleys in a mountainside.

Miserably Mr. Limpet confessed: "I'm married."

"'Married'?" echoed Ladyfish. "What's that?"

"I have a wife already."

"'Wife'?" she wanted to know.

"What you . . ."

"Oh," said Ladyfish, "that. Shall we go?"

"You mean," asked Mr. Limpet, "it doesn't make any difference to you?"

"I don't see why it should."

Mr. Limpet was shocked. Evidently morals didn't mean a thing to Ladyfish. A jealous suspicion rose in him. Rather hoarsely, he demanded: "Have you had a husband?"

"As a matter of fact," Ladyfish replied, "I haven't." She dropped her eyes once more. "You see, I'm quite young, and I've only just reached the——"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Limpet interrupted. Somehow he couldn't stand the frank way Ladyfish spoke. But he felt much better after her confession.

Even so, Mr. Limpet now knew his course. He would remain faithful to Bessie not especially because he wanted to, but be-

cause he thought it was the correct thing to do as a matter of decency.

Ladyfish seemed impatient. Once more she asked: "Shall we go?"

Mr. Limpet could not look at her. If he did he would be lost. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he told her. "But——" He could go no further.

Ladyfish stopped quivering. A fright exuded itself from her. For the first time she seemed to understand a little of Mr. Limpet's reluctance. Tremulously she asked: "Don't you like me?"

"More than anything else."

Though she didn't believe him, though Ladyfish thought that he was just being polite, she didn't behave the way a woman scorned usually carries on. She was merely hurt. She asked but one more question. "You aren't coming with me?"

"I—I can't." His own ultimatum made Mr. Limpet feel tragic. He didn't want to lose Ladyfish, if only because he might never meet another of their kind. None other than she would do in any case. "That is," he amended, "I'd like to go with you if we could—well, just be friends."

Ladyfish looked at him with deep reproach. Sadly she began to drift away.

Mr. Limpet turned to watch her go. She went slowly, her fins drooping, her beautiful tail moving listlessly, its colors no longer brilliant, but faded.

A mist came to Mr. Limpet's eyes, clouding his glasses. Through that Ladyfish disappeared.

Mr. Limpet came to his senses. He couldn't let Ladyfish go. The wild, surging certainty of this filled him with an impulse that sent him flying after her. The image of Bessie rose before him, even larger than before, but Mr. Limpet slashed through it, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

He came out on the other side expecting to see Ladyfish. But she wasn't there. Mr. Limpet gave another mighty sweep

with his tail and charged on. Still he didn't come up with Ladyfish.

Finally, defeated and exhausted, Mr. Limpet returned to Miami. For a whim of a life he had once led and to which he would never return, he had thrown away everything that could be dear to him.

He was contemplating this sorrowfully when a newspaper, thrown from a boat above, came down to him. When he saw the great black headline, larger than ever before, it meant little to him.

U. S. ENTERS WAR

Formerly, Mr. Limpet would have cheered. Now his heart didn't miss a beat. This was as nothing compared with the loss he had just suffered.

After a bit, however, Mr. Limpet roused himself to the extent of deciding that it was about time Hitler was shown a thing or two. Further, it occurred to him that America's entrance into the war could serve a purpose for him.

He would go to the war. He would drown his sorrow—though it was difficult for him to figure out a way of being drowned in any manner—by throwing himself into the conflict.

Mr. Limpet remembered the submarine he had seen. He remembered the torpedoed ship he had entered. With his powers of sight and hearing engines from afar, he would be decidedly useful to the United States Navy. He could get about in places where the Navy couldn't go unless it happened to be sunk. Of course the Navy had submarines which could do such work. But submarines could descend only to certain depths, they couldn't go nearly so fast as he could, and they couldn't be maneuvered as handily as he could switch around.

Mr. Limpet didn't find it so easy to get in contact with the U. S. Navy as he thought it might be. He had come to the North Atlantic, knowing that here there would be the greatest amount

of activity. He saw quite a number of U. S. Navy ships, but the difficulty was in speaking to them. "Speaking them," Mr. Limpet believed was the correct term. He was a little shaky about things nautical.

The first ship he saw was a large cruiser. It was steaming along at a great rate. But when Mr. Limpet approached it he knew it would be impossible for him to do anything with it. The noise of its engines and the beat of its propellers were so deafening that it hurt his eardrums. Or rather it hurt all along the hard little ridge running down each side of Mr. Limpet's body, which acted as his ears by receiving vibrations. And besides this, Mr. Limpet knew he could never make himself heard over such noises.

Next he saw a true man-of-war, one of the great battle-wagons. The noise this made on Mr. Limpet's hearing ridges was so resounding that he couldn't approach within half a mile of it.

He decided that he would have to find a much smaller ship. After a good deal of trouble he managed to search out several of them. But they were all going along at such an alarming rate that they had no time to stop and talk with a fish. And they were hardly prepared to do so.

Finally one night Mr. Limpet came upon what he wanted. He found a U. S. warship that was simply drifting in the sea. At first he thought it was in distress, but soon, even through the black night, with no lights showing from the ship, he understood that it was merely lying in wait.

Mr. Limpet swam up to the side near the bridge. He stood about twenty yards off. Bracing himself with his tail and working his fins to hold himself in position, he put his head out of water and called: "Ahoy! Ship ahoy!"

For a moment there was no answer from the ship. The vessel seemed to Mr. Limpet to give out a feeling of being non-plussed, if a boat can be said to express itself in that manner.

He wasn't entirely prepared for what happened then. A bell began to clang, a siren sounded its excitement, and a voice called distinctly: "Action stations!"

The sounds of a large-scale bustle came from the ship. Feet pattered on the decks. Men ran. Machinery moved. There were clicks and snaps and grindings.

Mr. Limpet hadn't meant to create such a furore. "Don't be alarmed," he called.

From the ship there came a voice demanding: "What the obscenity is this?"

"I am a friend," Mr. Limpet replied.

"Who the Hemingway are you?"

"I'm Henry Limpet."

"Who the obscene way is Henry Limpet?"

"Don't you remember?" asked Mr. Limpet. "I fell in the ocean and was drowned. Only I wasn't drowned. I became a fish."

There was silence from the ship.

"Don't you hear me?" Mr. Limpet called.

He was answered again. "We're at war, whoever you are. This is no time for joking."

"I'm not joking," Mr. Limpet protested.

An order came from the ship. "Give the recognition signal."

"I can't."

"Give it, and give it quick!"

"But I don't know it," Mr. Limpet complained.

The next thing he knew, there was a loud explosion from the ship. Flame and smoke belched. In the water very near him, instantly, another explosion took place.

Mr. Limpet was thrown into the air. When he landed back in the water he was stunned. His head cleared only when flame and smoke came again from the ship.

This time Mr. Limpet used the concussion in the water to empty his air sacs and swim down, quickly and deeply.

In the depths, while the explosions continued on the surface overhead, Mr. Limpet considered the situation. This would never do. He might get himself killed, and then he would be of no use whatsoever.

He was jarred as a more tremendous explosion took place. The ship was sending down depth charges. Mr. Limpet moved

a little away, regretting this waste of ammunition. He felt responsible.

He had failed. He didn't see how he could ever agreeably contact the U. S. Navy and work with it. It came to him wholly for the first time how difficult it would be for the Navy to accept a fish as a collaborator. He was inclined to think that this was utterly impossible.

It was some days before a method that might work occurred to Mr. Limpet. It was when he saw a destroyer that he knew how it could be done. If he could find Mr. Stickle and talk with him, that ought to turn the trick. Mr. Limpet smiled to himself at the turn this would also give Mr. Stickle.

Swimming about in the Atlantic, he saw other destroyers. But he didn't come across that of Mr. Stickle. Mr. Limpet wondered if his friend's ship had been sent to the Pacific. He didn't like the idea of wasting time by going out there to find him. He would probably have to go all the way round South America, as he didn't care for the idea of risking getting through the Panama Canal.

Mr. Limpet began to fret. He hadn't seen a newspaper in weeks and had no idea of how things were getting on. If they weren't going well, it was dreadful to think that his services were meanwhile being wasted.

Then, one night, a chance came without having to find Mr. Stickle. From some miles away he heard through the water the deep vibrations that he had come to know as those of depth charges.

He streaked toward the sounds to investigate.

As he approached, the explosions ceased and a curious thrumming noise, much like that Mr. Limpet was able to give out to frighten enemies, took their place.

When he arrived at the spot, Mr. Limpet saw a destroyer cruising slowly in circles, her engines shut down almost entirely. It was from her that the thrumming noise came.

Mr. Limpet deduced that she had seen a German submarine, had dropped a number of depth charges, and was now prob-

ing with her oscillator. This was a device, he knew from his reading in books, that sent vibrations to the bottom of the sea. The vibrations bounced back, and the time it took for them to return determined the depth of the water. It was also used as a locator, for the vibrations would come back stronger from a metal body on the bottom, such as a submarine.

Mr. Limpet knew he had to work fast, before the destroyer began dropping depth charges again. He swam down swiftly and began to search. He could not see clearly at night in the black depths of the water, but he could see.

Almost at once he observed what he wanted.

The submarine lay on the bottom, quite still. Not even a bubble rose from it. Above, the destroyer passed nearly over it, but not close enough to find it.

Mr. Limpet shot to the surface. He might be killed by a shell from the destroyer, but it was better than not taking this opportunity. He decided that a direct approach, wasting no effort on preliminaries, would be best.

At the side of the destroyer, he braced his tail, worked his fins furiously, stuck his head out of water, and called:

"You missed it. Turn back to your left and you'll be right over it."

He was astonished at how commanding his voice sounded. It was just the way he had imagined it to be in his adventurous day-dreams.

From the destroyer the light blinked faster. Someone called. A siren began to sing and then was immediately shut off. There were other evidences of some confusion.

For an awful instant Mr. Limpet wondered what was going to happen. Then the destroyer's engines began to turn fast, the ship wheeled, careening, on a new course, to return to the spot Mr. Limpet had indicated.

Mr. Limpet sank and darted far enough away to be safe. From there he listened.

The first charge shook him slightly. Four others came, one after another, jarring the world. Then there was silence again.

Mr. Limpet waited a little while where he was. After that,

cautiously, he began to make his way back to the place where the submarine lay.

He saw it again. Only now it was flattened out. Its conning tower was twisted awry, its plates were buckled, and all along its cigar-shaped form it looked as if something heavy had landed on it.

Mr. Limpet rose to the surface. Thirty yards away from the destroyer he put his head out. A small searchlight was now playing on the water. In its glare there were to be seen thin, spreading pools of oil, bits of cork, and other debris from the destroyed submarine.

Mr. Limpet felt like a hero.

In fact, he was a hero. But no one except himself knew this yet. And it was going to be a ticklish proposition convincing anyone else of it.

Mr. Limpet called out: "Ahoy!"

The searchlight swung about and its beam caught him full in the face. He was blinded as he heard an exclamation from the destroyer and then a man yelling: "Sea serpent!"

Mr. Limpet sank, swam down the length of the destroyer so that he stood somewhat off the bows, and came up again.

The searchlight was moving about, trying to find him. There were calls now on the destroyer. Men cried excitedly. A new voice issued a command. The men stopped calling. The searchlight was shut off, though the blinker pin-point kept at its work.

There was a heavy silence on the sea until Mr. Limpet addressed the ship once more.

"If you will promise not to put your searchlight on me again," he said, "I'll inform you as to just what has happened."

From the destroyer there came a voice that sounded slightly agitated. "You don't answer our recognition signal."

"That may be as it may be," was all Mr. Limpet could find to answer to this.

"We can't see you. We can make out no vessel."

"I am not a vessel," Mr. Limpet replied. "Neither am I a sea serpent."

"Answer our signal," he was told, "or——"

"That's enough of that nonsense," Mr. Limpet said sharply.

"I'm just a plain American who——"

"American, are you?" came from the ship skeptically.

"Listen," said Mr. Limpet. "You were trying to locate a submarine, weren't you? You couldn't find it, could you? I told you where it was, didn't I? Then you got it, didn't you?"

He fired his questions like shots from a machine-gun. He was discovering that he had armament of his own.

From the ship there came a grudging admission. "We don't know what to make of it. We can see nothing of you. How are you keeping afloat out there?"

"I'm swimming."

"We'll send a boat immediately. And give you a light."

"Don't you send any boat," Mr. Limpet ordered, "and don't you put on that searchlight again."

"What the obsceneway Heming is this?"

"Am I speaking with the Commander?" Mr. Limpet inquired.

"You Hemscene obingway are."

"If you will stop using dirty words," Mr. Limpet lectured, "for which I see no necessity at all, and pay careful attention, I'll tell you about myself."

"This," came from the Commander, "is *making* me a dirty word. Go ahead, but go ahead fast. I'm not staying around here long talking to thin air."

"I am not thin air," Mr. Limpet said. "I am a——" He was about to explain what he was when he saw the mistake this would be.

"Well, what are you?" came the demand.

There was only one way in which he could convince them. He needed Mr. Stickle after all.

"I can't tell you that," Mr. Limpet responded. "You wouldn't believe it. Not even if you saw me. I can only tell you

that I am in a position to be of great assistance to the Navy, as you have just seen demonstrated. And perhaps in a great many other ways."

He went on to explain that in the Navy there was a man, his best friend, who might be made to believe and identify him. He gave Mr. Stickle's name, his rank as third engineer, and the name of his ship.

"I want to talk to him," Mr. Limpet said. "I want him brought here."

He waited while a short consultation was held on the destroyer. He heard the Commander's voice again, admitting: "My chief engineer says there's a George Stickle, second engineer, on the *Starbright*."

Mr. Limpet was pleased to learn that Mr. Stickle had received a promotion.

He didn't press his point now that he had established a point of credibility. He waited for the Commander to speak next.

There were muffled sounds from the ship. Finally there came back the reply: "All I can do is send in a report on this business."

"A complete report," urged Mr. Limpet, "telling everything that happened."

"You'll get your credit," came the reply. "Don't worry. If anybody will believe it. I don't myself. And I can't guarantee Stickle."

"I'll be back here in three days," Mr. Limpet said, "to see."

"Do you want me to give you the position?"

"I don't need it."

There were splutterings from the bridge of the destroyer. Then her engines began to hum and she moved off, quite fast, as though not at all comfortable about being in this part of the sea.

It was in Mr. Limpet's mind to use the intervening three days to take a trip south and look about for Ladyfish. But

he thought better of this. If he found her, his resolve might weaken. He wasn't exactly afraid of the strength of his patriotism. But in the face of such a love as he felt, he didn't want to risk it.

He hung about the spot of the wrecked submarine, mostly staying on the bottom. He rested and ate huge quantities of food. If he were allowed to join the Navy he would have a great deal of strenuous work to do, and he wanted to be in the best condition possible.

On the third day he watched for the Navy to appear. When it didn't, he was downcast. The next day no one came, and the following day the surface of the ocean was as empty as it had been before.

Dispiritedly Mr. Limpet allowed himself to sink in the mud. He felt that was where he belonged. He lay there morosely until dark. When night came, he was just as sad as he had been all day, and trying to make up his mind whether to speak another warship or give it all up and go to find Ladyfish.

He was roused from his stupor by the faint throbbing of engines.

The ship so courageously coming in arrived over Mr. Limpet. It didn't anchor. Its engines kept turning over slowly, holding it at the correct location.

Mr. Limpet rose to the surface and put his head out of water to look things over. He saw that it was the same destroyer as before. On the bridge he could make out, dimly, a cluster of figures. Evidently other personages had come along. Mr. Limpet felt flattered.

"Hello," he called. "George? This is Henry Limpet."

There was a commotion on the bridge.

No one had answered him, so Mr. Limpet called again. "Is Mr. Stickle there?"

The Commander replied. "Stickle's here. But he isn't feeling very well right now."

Another voice sounded, a voice filled with importance that showed signs of excitement. "Who is that?" it demanded.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Limpet replied, "but for the moment I will speak only with Mr. Stickle."

"He's coming around," the Commander called. "He can talk to you now."

Mr. Limpet heard Mr. Stickle's voice from the bridge. It wasn't very strong, not like Mr. Stickle's at all, and it quavered. "Wh-what did you say? D-did you say you're H-Henry Limpet?"

"Of course I am, George," Mr. Limpet told him.

There was a gasp from Mr. Stickle. Then there were sounds giving evidence that he was getting more control of himself. "When you first spoke," he said, "I thought I recognized your voice." Then Mr. Stickle went all to pieces again. "I mean Henry Limpet's voice. But Henry's dead!" Mr. Stickle wailed.

"No, I'm not," Mr. Limpet told him.

"I saw him die with my own eyes," Mr. Stickle twittered. "Right at Coney Island."

"I didn't die, George," Mr. Limpet answered. He spoke soothingly now. In his eagerness to talk with his old friend again, he had overlooked entirely what a shock it would be to him. "I'm just as alive as you are. Only a little different now."

Mr. Stickle didn't reply. Instead, Mr. Limpet knew his friend was chewing one end of his mustache.

"You said you recognize my voice," Mr. Limpet pointed out.

Mr. Stickle, as if he had been both prompted and urged to stand up for his rights, now demanded: "How do I know you aren't somebody imitating Henry Limpet, pretending to be him?"

"Let's go at it slowly," Mr. Limpet advised. "I know it's going to be hard for you. It was hard for me at first."

Mr. Limpet went over for Mr. Stickle the story of his drowning. He recalled to him that his body had not been found. "You remember," he asked, "that you jumped in after me?"

"I do," Mr. Stickle admitted stiffly.

"And you saw a fish?"

"Why," said Mr. Stickle, with the stiffness gone from him, "I did."

"Did you notice anything strange about it?"

"I thought it was wearing glasses," Mr. Stickle said awesomely. "But that was my imagination. Though I'll tell you the truth: it looked like you; that is, it looked like Henry Limpet."

"There you are," Mr. Limpet said. "I was that fish. I am that fish now."

"You say," Mr. Stickle quavered, "you say you—you're a fish?"

"A fish," stated Mr. Limpet firmly.

The important voice intervened. "That's enough!" it roared.

"Wait!" Mr. Limpet cried. "George," he went on hastily, "do you remember the time you held that nine-spade suit? You bid small slam and made grand slam. It stretched the rubber, and we had the new brand of beer that night. Bessie didn't like it, and it went to Clara's head. How is Bessie?"

"The beer's fine," Mr. Stickle answered. "I mean, Bessie's dizzy. *I'm* dizzy," he finally managed to say.

Mr. Limpet's rapid-fire account of things he could not have known very well unless he were actually himself, and the effect of them upon Mr. Stickle, had the desired result. The destroyer still stayed where it was.

Mr. Stickle was sufficiently recovered again to put forth some questions. The first one he asked was:

"When you nosed around for information about my ship on the way to Coney Island in the subway the day you were drowned, what did I tell you?"

"You said it was a military secret." Mr. Limpet had the suspicion that with this question Mr. Stickle was killing two birds with one stone. Not only was he checking up on Henry Limpet, but he was trying to impress the superiors who stood on the bridge with him, too. Mr. Limpet could not refrain from now stating: "You were just showing off, George."

"That's neither here nor there," Mr. Stickle replied snapshishly. "What size collar do I wear?"

"Fourteen and a half," Mr. Limpet replied at once. "When you borrowed one from me the day of your second marriage,

it was a whole size too small. George, I never could understand how you didn't have a clean collar of your own on the day you——"

Mr. Stickle was not interested in small talk or levity while a fleet of ships attended their conversation. He was now functioning in his capacity as an officer. "How much money did I win on the baseball pool last season?"

"You didn't win a thing, George. As usual."

Mr. Stickle asked no more questions. There was a whispered consultation on the bridge. Then Mr. Stickle's voice came again. "The Admiral," he stated, "wishes now to see you."

So, thought Mr. Limpet, the commanding voice was that of an admiral. They had thought enough of his previous performance to send such a personage along. "Don't keep the light on too long," Mr. Limpet said. "It blinds me."

A searchlight sprang its pencil of glare through the night. It wasn't on Mr. Limpet, but moved about, trying to find him. "Over here," he directed.

Then Mr. Limpet was staring into its brilliance. His head out of water, his eyeglasses perched on the end of his nose, he made quite a sight there sticking out of the sea.

"That's him, all right!" gasped Mr. Stickle. "That's you, Henry!"

There was a buzz of comment from the bridge. It made Mr. Limpet feel a good deal like a monstrosity being looked at in a sideshow. The searchlight wasn't turned off. It seemed as if they couldn't get over looking at him, or perhaps the man operating the light was too paralyzed to turn it off.

"That's enough," said Mr. Limpet.

The light went out with a jerk of its beam.

Mr. Stickle didn't seem capable of further conversation with his friend at the moment. It was the Admiral who now addressed Mr. Limpet. His voice wasn't quite so commanding as before. It shook slightly when he said:

"I don't pretend to understand this."

"It's a mistake to try to, Admiral," Mr. Limpet advised. "I don't understand it myself."

The Admiral pulled himself partially together. "I can understand, however," he said, "the manner in which you could be of assistance to us."

"Great assistance," suggested Mr. Limpet.

"Great assistance," repeated the admiral. "Naturally, that is true. I—before proceeding officially," he went on, "I will have to confer with the Cincus that is, with . . . who will probably take it up with Washington. I regard it as a matter of sufficient importance to do this at once. Can you wait here for a few hours, Mr. Limpet?"

Mr. Limpet said he would be very glad to.

The Admiral continued: "In any operations, we should follow your suggestions, subject, of course, as to how the first ones succeed. But at the same time do you stand ready to take orders?"

"I stand ready." Something else occurred to Mr. Limpet. "Admiral," he said, "if you take me on, I should like to be a regular paid member of the Navy."

"Pay?" asked the Admiral. "How would you——?"

"Oh, I'm not thinking of myself," Mr. Limpet said. "It's my wife. I should like my salary to go to her."

"I see," said the Admiral. "Of course."

"I feel also," said Mr. Limpet, "that I should be given a rank better than an enlisted man."

Sounds of choking came from the Admiral. "Hardly accustomed," he got out, "to commissioning a—a fish."

Offended, Mr. Limpet replied sharply: "I don't see why not!"

The Admiral muttered that he would see what he could do. He moved off the bridge to go to the wireless room.

Mr. Limpet waited. He wondered what the Cincus was. Then he remembered reading an explanation of this. The Cincus was the Commander in Chief of the entire United States fleet.

Mr. Limpet's chest puffed out a little.

Mr. Stickle's voice came from the ship. "Are you there, Henry?"

"Right here."

Mr. Stickle coughed. That was evidently all he could find to say.

"You didn't tell me how Bessie is," Mr. Limpet reminded him.

"She's all right," said Mr. Stickle.

"'All right'?" demanded Mr. Limpet. "Doesn't she miss me?"

"Sure she does. I meant she's getting on all right. Even though she never got over your being drowned."

"Well, you can tell her I'm not drowned."

Mr. Stickle was silent. Obviously he was contemplating the prospect of explaining about Mr. Limpet to Mrs. Limpet.

"How's Clara?" Mr. Limpet wanted to know.

"Clara? She's well. At least she's Clara." Mr. Stickle cleared his throat. "It looks as if there's going to be another Clara around. Though I guess you know," he went on fervently, "how much I'd rather have it another George."

Mr. Limpet understood that his friend meant more by this than wishing a son in preference to a daughter. Two Claras were hardly to be envisioned.

"Well," he said, "you old dog!"

"You old——" Mr. Stickle thought better of the retort he had in mind and didn't finish it. Instead, he inquired: "How is it?"

"How is what?"

"Being a—being what you are."

"Not bad at all. In fact, it's very interesting."

"Hmm," commented Mr. Stickle.

"How is the war going?" asked Mr. Limpet.

"We're cleaning things up. But there's still a lot of cleaning to do. Maybe with you—I guess having you—though I don't get it how you—since that day . . ." Mr. Stickle was floundering. He said nothing for a moment, but it was clear that something was on his mind. "Henry," he then said, "it'll be a long time before I get used to this. But to start at the beginning—that day on the pier: Did you fall or jump?"

"I don't know, George. I just don't know. Does it matter?"

"I dunno. I don't know anything about this," Mr. Stickle answered dolefully.

"I'm getting tired keeping my head out of water," Mr. Limpet told him. "I'm going down to rest. Call me when the Admiral is ready."

"Here!" cried Mr. Stickle. "How do we call you?"

"Use the oscillator," directed Mr. Limpet. "I'll hear it."

It was nearly dawn before Mr. Limpet heard the oscillator of the destroyer sending down its vibrations. As he rose to speak it again, he noted that certain changes had taken place while he dozed. He didn't mean to show off to the Admiral about this, but merely wanted to exhibit that he knew his business when he told him, "All the other ships except one have gone."

The Admiral acknowledged this. "Except my flagship," he said. "I will be rejoining that presently." The Admiral made a harrumphing noise in his throat. "Mr. Limpet," he began, "or perhaps I should say Lieutenant Limpet, which——"

"Lieutenant?" cried Mr. Limpet, beaming.

"—which you will be in a moment, this is to inform you that your services have been officially accepted. Though I may say," the Admiral amended, "only on my personal responsibility and at considerable risk to the status of my own position. It has been difficult explaining this matter, which has not, in most respects, been credited yet."

"I can well imagine," said Mr. Limpet.

"The upshot of it, however," the Admiral continued, "is that, temporarily, *pro tem.*, experimentally, and depending strictly upon results, I am empowered to co-operate with you. Ha! I will now swear you in."

The searchlight was once more turned on Mr. Limpet.

He raised his right fin and repeated the oath of loyalty that the Admiral intoned in a rather strange voice.

Mr. Limpet took this very seriously and gravely, for that was the way he felt. When the searchlight went out he was Lieutenant Limpet of the United States Navy.

It was arranged then that Lieutenant Limpet should accompany the destroyer. He would be attached to it, and the destroyer attached to him. Mr. Stickle, who had obtained some standing by reason of his friendship with Mr. Limpet, had been taken from his usual duties. He was made liaison officer between the fleet and Lieutenant Limpet.

The Lieutenant's first duty, he was informed, was to go with the destroyer while it joined a convoy of ships laden with goods for England. He was to scout submarines, which usually hunted the convoys in packs.

Mr. Limpet watched while the great flagship of the Admiral steamed up and the Admiral boarded a smart launch that came out from it. He was taken to his ship, and then the two vessels wheeled on a course for the northwest.

Mr. Limpet swam happily between them, just under the surface so that he could see them both clearly. He was filled with a pride that he had never felt before in his wildest day-dreams. He wished that Bessie could see him now.

Bessie? Why was he thinking of Bessie? Why didn't he think first of Ladyfish?

This was, he reflected, because he didn't seem to have to prove himself to Ladyfish, while he did to Bessie. But, most of all, seeing Mr. Stickle again and speaking with human beings once more seemed to bring him back to Bessie. And though he didn't want to go back to her, wanting only to be with Ladyfish, there was, freshly again, the fact that he was married to Bessie and that she was still alive. He couldn't, after all, erase that.

Mr. Limpet tried not to admit to himself that several times he had wondered, and even gone so far as to hope, that Bessie . . .

He downed such wicked thoughts in his further joy at being of unusual importance in the world. He wished that he might have a uniform. A naval lieutenant's uniform, he was sure,

must be quite a nice and glittering thing. Would he carry a sword? Mr. Limpet laughed at himself and at the picture he would make carrying a sword when he had no legs with which to trip over it.

In place of a uniform and a sword with which to express himself, Mr. Limpet began to weave about in the water. First he slashed to this side and then to the other. Between times he went up and down, heading deep into the water and then coming up, giving himself the sensation of being on a roller-coaster. He had come to like the wild, darting freedom of such movements, and now he indulged them freely.

It was because of these antics that he didn't see the manta ray coming after him.

The manta was already striking in for the kill just as Mr. Limpet became aware of it. He let out his thrumming noise while the mouth was about to engulf him.

It failed to stop the ray entirely. Its rush was so fast that it didn't have time to turn altogether away in fright at the noise repellent even to a creature of its size. The heavy lower jaw of the great devilfish struck Mr. Limpet a resounding blow just over the head.

Then the manta was gone.

Dazed, Mr. Limpet shook his head. The skin there was only scraped and otherwise he was all right except for the loss of a few scales. And except for a strange feeling he had when he moved his head. His eyes began to clear. But they would not clear entirely. He could see barely twenty feet ahead.

He shook his head again to clear it more. Still his eyesight became no better. Then he knew it would become no better by this method.

The ray had knocked off his eyeglasses.

Well, thought Mr. Limpet, this is a pretty kettle of fish. The aptness of the phrase struck him with force. He laughed nervously.

Mr. Limpet had been brought to a stop by the manta's attack. Meanwhile the ships were surging ahead. He decided that he had better find his eyeglasses before the ships got so

far ahead that he couldn't hear the vibrations of their engines. He would be pretty useless to the Navy without his glasses.

He emptied his air sacs and power-dived. It was unnerving to him when he came to the bottom almost before he saw it. He very nearly hit bottom, so fast was his dive.

There he began to hunt about for his eyeglasses. Fortunately the bottom here was sandy, with little growth of weed to hide lost objects. Nevertheless, because of his bad eyesight now—Mr. Limpet judged it to be worse than that of a born fish because his eyes were weak normally—he couldn't locate them.

He pushed about, nosing in the sand because he believed they might be buried. But though he bruised his nose a good deal, he didn't find the glasses.

He kept listening to the ships' engines, which continually sounded fainter and fainter. He hurried, now sweeping the sand with strong, abrupt turns of his tail. At last he was rewarded.

He uncovered his eyeglasses, but in what a state! Both lenses were broken, shattered beyond any possibility of seeing anything through them. Mr. Limpet stared at them in dismay.

How could he protect himself now? How could he live? How could he be impressive to Ladyfish? How could he help the Navy?

At the thought of the Navy Mr. Limpet became very still and listened. He could hear nothing. The ships were beyond even his keen sense of hearing.

He trembled in his despair.

Mr. Limpet's life became exceptionally miserable.

Besides all his difficulties at self-preservation, he was weighed down with a great sense of accusation directed at himself. He blamed himself for becoming lost in a foolish pride. That, and that alone, had brought this tragedy upon him. If he had been paying attention to business instead of

cavorting about, thinking how fine he was, the manta would never have bounced his glasses from him and broken them.

Even more than himself, Mr. Limpet was worried about the Navy. He knew well that the Navy could ordinarily give an excellent account of itself. It could get along without him all right. But now the Navy was counting on him, and he wasn't there to fulfill his duties.

Perhaps the Navy might even relax its vigilance a little, thinking he was in the sea beside it, ready to give warning. He thought of the convoy he had been detailed to protect. If it were sunk, there would be tragedy indeed. Suppose his defection might mean that Hitler would win the war? Mr. Limpet shuddered.

He slunk along mostly near the bottom. Several times when he left the bottom, other larger fish attacked him. Usually he sensed them in time to thrum them away, but he had several very narrow escapes. At the sight of any strange thing he sent out his noise of defiance. Twice he made his thrumming noise at what turned out to be inanimate objects.

Sometimes he remained hidden under crevices while large schools of other fish went overhead. He had never had to do that before. Not since the attack of the first shark the day he came into this formerly beautiful world had Mr. Limpet felt fear. Now it was with him continually.

He began to get thin not only from worry but because he lost most of his appetite. And now he had to snatch food when he came across it, and then quickly, before others, larger than himself, arrived to drive him away. Once, because of his bad eyesight, he ate something that made him very sick.

Mr. Limpet felt that he couldn't last long this way.

On the fourth day of his misery a massive dark object loomed before him. He could make it out only dimly. At first he thought it must be a whale. Whatever it was unnerved Mr. Limpet completely. He was ready to make his thrumming noise at it. But it was so tremendous that he had no confidence in its being impressed by him. And never could he hope to get away from it by running.

Mr. Limpet made no attempt to run or to frighten this gigantic creature. He just didn't care any more. Actively, he didn't care. He decided that it wouldn't be long before he was killed by something, and he might as well meet his end at the hands of something big. That way it would be over quickly.

Slowly he swam toward it.

He felt no sense of surprise when, instead of a living monster, it turned out to be a ship. Neither did he feel any sense of relief, for though it changed his immediate prospect of life and death, it altered it not at all in the ultimate sense.

There was a third thing that Mr. Limpet didn't feel.

That was anger, which usually entered into him at the sight of a submarine or a sunken ship. Now he was filled only with a great sorrow for all humanity that the bottom of the sea was being littered with ships. Man, with infinite care and patience, built beautiful, ingenious things and then proceeded to destroy them. What wanton perversity in mankind was responsible for this unenviable state of affairs?

Mr. Limpet was appalled when he entered the ship. Going into one of the cabins, he found it was still occupied. A man, clad in his pajamas, lay sprawled upon the floor. Lying on the bed and clad only in a sheer nightgown, her head swaying slightly from side to side with the movement of the water, as though she were disagreeing with something, was the man's wife.

At least it never occurred to Mr. Limpet to think the lady was anything but his wife. And she probably was.

He showed no signs of any awakened interest in life until he came to a cabin where a large man sat on the floor with his back propped up against the wall. The man seemed fascinated by various things floating at the ceiling, for he stared at them intently through a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.

Mr. Limpet had concluded that there was no way for him to replace his own eyeglasses. Now he felt a jolt go through him.

He was already working it out as he swirled from the man and dashed to investigate more cabins.

Horn-rimmed spectacles meant nothing to him. He couldn't use them. He had no ears by which to hold them on. But another passenger might have eyeglasses to pinch over his nose as his own had done.

Gently Mr. Limpet took the metal eye-piece between his teeth and pulled. The glasses came away easily. Then he swam to the top of the smoking-room and dropped them. They began to sink, turning over and over, but before they touched the floor Mr. Limpet had darted under them and caught them on his nose.

He looked through them.

All he could see was a blur.

They would never do.

Disappointed, he shook them off.

He continued making the circuit of the room. The last person to be examined had no glasses whatsoever.

It was on his way out, to search elsewhere, that Mr. Limpet noticed the first man he had passed. The light now caught in a different way what perched on his nose. An inviting glint came back to Mr. Limpet.

Carefully he removed them and went through his trick again. This time, when he looked, he could see almost as well as with his own eyeglasses. He peered out a porthole, and was thrilled to discover that he could see for a great distance. His vision wasn't quite so good as it had been before, and after a moment of wearing the new eyeglasses he found that they hurt his eyes a little, but he could once more see well enough for his purpose.

Mr. Limpet was alive again.

Without thinking further, he darted out of the ship to join the vessels of war. But once outside, he didn't know in which direction to turn. Because he had been too depressed to keep track lately, he didn't even know which way was north and which south.

He was floating, quite stumped about this problem, when he saw something moving to one side of him. Mr. Limpet let out his thrumming noise loudly. But the more he increased it, the

faster the other fish came on. It was the first time his signal of ferocity had failed to work.

Then he saw why it wasn't effective.

"Ladyfish!" he cried.

Ladyfish came up, braked with her tail and fins, and without a word nosed Mr. Limpet. He nosed her back, his spine tingling.

"Oh, Limpet!" she exclaimed. "I've never heard anything more beautiful than that noise you make. I've been looking all over the ocean for you."

"I," said Mr. Limpet tremulously, "have been thinking about you every minute."

This wasn't quite true. But Mr. Limpet believed that, from the viewpoint of a male, who sometimes had other things to think about than women, it was true enough. And certainly he was more than glad to see Ladyfish.

Ladyfish looked weary. But her eyes were bright and the colors in her tail glowed with leaping fire as it undulated.

Now that they had found each other again and the first excitement of their greeting was over, there ensued the little embarrassed pause that usually follows such a moment.

Ladyfish filled it first in her own direct manner.

"It was wrong of me to leave you like that," she said. "Probably it was because I had never met anyone like you before. And I had been taught—well, anyway, I've been trying to find you ever since to tell you, Limpet, that I'd like to be with you on your own terms."

Mr. Limpet considered this. He realized how generous it was of Ladyfish, but somehow the arrangement she suggested didn't sound altogether satisfactory.

To indulge in only a platonic association with Ladyfish was all right as far as Bessie was concerned—if Bessie didn't find out about it. But Mr. Limpet's feelings for Ladyfish were anything but platonic. Still, there was his conscience about such matters. And, above all, there was still Bessie.

Mr. Limpet had never juggled two women at the same time

before in his life. He didn't know what to do. He was utterly confused.

Finally he decided that the best thing to do, perhaps, was to tell Ladyfish the whole situation and see what she thought about it.

"The first thing I want you to know," he told her, "is that I love you more than anything else in the world."

"I don't know what the world is," Ladyfish replied, her eyes sparkling, "but if it's as big as the ocean, I like it very much. I, too, love you, Limpet. That's why I searched for you so far. There aren't many of our kind, you know."

A horrible thought came to Mr. Limpet. "Is that why you——?"

"Oh, no!" cried Ladyfish. "I love you for yourself, Limpet."

She was so earnest, even fervent, and she stated this so simply, that Mr. Limpet believed her implicitly. As indeed he should have.

The next thing he said in connection with his explanation was to ask: "Do you know what a human being is?"

"I ought to," Ladyfish replied contemptuously, "with so many of them coming down here lately."

It was clear that she didn't have a very high opinion of human beings. Mr. Limpet wondered what she would think when she knew he had once been one. He saw that no hurried revelation of this would do at all. He put it off for a moment by asking: "Then you know what a ship is?"

"Ship?" asked Ladyfish.

Mr. Limpet pointed to the liner. "That."

"Oh," said Ladyfish, "the thunders up above that sometimes die with even louder noises than they make most of the time. I just saw a lot of them."

"You did?" cried Mr. Limpet. "Where?"

Ladyfish pointed a fin in one direction. "I never saw so many before. A whole school of them, spread out for miles. Some of them were regular thunders, others were big thunders, and a few were very big thunders."

Mr. Limpet knew then that she had seen the convoy with its accompanying warships. Excitedly he asked: "Did you see any small thunders that can come down with us here?"

"Six of them," Ladyfish replied at once. "Those I like least of all, because of the way they give birth to their young. They spit them out."

Mr. Limpet had a horrible fear that the submarines were already firing their torpedoes into the convoy. "Were any young being born when you saw these?"

Ladyfish shook her head in the negative.

This changed the whole aspect of things. Mr. Limpet could not stay to explain anything more to Ladyfish now. That would have to wait.

"I've got to leave you," he said.

"Leave me?" Ladyfish exclaimed. "Limpet, don't you want me in *any* way?"

Mr. Limpet swam to her side and quivered in the way she had done down off Miami. Then he came around to the front of her and touched his nose to hers. "I do, I do," he said. "But I must do something else before we can talk about that any more."

"I'm going with you," Ladyfish said.

"You can't," Mr. Limpet told her. "You don't understand the things I shall be getting into. It's extremely dangerous and you might get killed."

"How about you?" she asked in alarm.

"I'll be all right. Wait for me here, Ladyfish. Will you wait?"

Ladyfish's lower lip trembled. Hurt and concerned, she asked: "Has where you're going anything to do with us?"

This was a poser. Mr. Limpet, in his urge to be off and get to the convoy in time, thought frantically. Could he say honestly that it had?

He grabbed at the first thing that entered his head. This was that he would have time to think over and decide what he should do about Bessie and Ladyfish. "It has everything to do with us," he replied.

Ladyfish stared at him, examining him and evaluating his reply. Then she seemed satisfied, if not altogether happy.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Mr. Limpet told her.

He nosed her quickly and she nosed him back, clinging to him before he forced himself to break from her.

The sweep of his tail as he propelled himself forward in the direction in which she had pointed her fin was so tremendous that Ladyfish was swept backward several feet.

Gradually, as he streaked through the water, the sound of the ships ahead came to Mr. Limpet. As it became stronger, and he could tell exactly where they were, Mr. Limpet changed his course. Instead of going directly to them, he went off to one side, ahead of them.

Mr. Limpet knew what he was doing. His extensive reading had not been for nothing, and now it stood him in excellent stead.

Some miles ahead of where he judged the convoy to be, he came upon half a dozen submarines lurking just beneath the surface. One of them had its periscope sticking out above, and Mr. Limpet knew it was spotting the convoy.

Even as he came up, the periscope was withdrawn. There was a moment of inactivity while the undersea vultures communicated with each other. Then they began to spread out. Mr. Limpet knew how they would arrange death. Two of them would fire destruction at the head corners of the convoy, two of them at the middle of it, and two more at its rear corners.

Mr. Limpet wasted no more time observing this. Fury was upon him as it never had been before. He fairly boiled through the water to get to the convoy.

When he reached it, he saw that the destroyer to which he was attached led several long lines of cargo ships. At each corner there was another destroyer, and down the lines there were still more. The Admiral's flagship was not in sight. Probably it was off on other business.

Mr. Limpet came up to his ship. It was not steaming very fast, but it was nevertheless making quite a racket in the water. He put his head out and called: "George! Ahoy! George!"

As the ships kept running toward disaster, Mr. Limpet continued to yell. But his efforts were to no avail whatsoever.

He made no further attempt to call, but began to jump. In this way he might be noticed. He had the fear that even if he were seen, the men on the destroyer would take no more notice of him than they would of any fish. Then Mr. Limpet realized he wasn't just any fish. He wore eyeglasses on his nose. This would set him apart.

He jumped as high as he could, and kept jumping. For some time nothing happened.

Then, abruptly, the destroyer slowed down. Its engines quieted. Mr. Limpet swam up to the side. Now he could make out the Commander, Mr. Stickle, and others quite clearly on the bridge.

"Where the Ernest have you been?" Mr. Stickle raged, chewing at his mustache. "That was a fine thing! Selling us on the idea you could help us, and then——"

"Subs!" croaked Mr. Limpet. "Six of them. They'll attack you any minute!"

He waited only long enough to see that his message was believed and acted upon. Flag signals began to be given. The columns of the convoy veered off on another course.

Then Mr. Limpet dived deeply to observe and listen.

The explosions he had heard in the ocean before were as nothing compared with those that came now. The whole sea seemed to consist of one tremendous concussion after another. Even as deep down as he was, they often rocked Mr. Limpet.

He swam about, watching the results of the good work. He saw one submarine slowly sinking to the bottom, its air escaping as it went. Another plunged down, one end torn completely off. A third was split in two, disgorging the bodies of men. Mr. Limpet felt a little sick about that.

He counted five destroyed submarines, and the sixth he saw escaping. At that he rose to the surface. He had a little

difficulty in locating his destroyer in the welter of the ships of the convoy, which now zigzagged about the ocean. But finally he located it, hove to at the sign of a bubble of oil.

"What's the idea?" Mr. Limpet wanted to know.

Mr. Stickle's voice came back. "What do you mean, 'What's the idea?'"

"You only got five of them," Mr. Limpet pointed out.

"Did we get the fifth?" Mr. Stickle was delighted to know.

"We weren't sure."

"What about the sixth?" Mr. Limpet demanded.

"Listen," said Mr. Stickle, "we figure we did pretty well. The ship after the sixth couldn't pick it up after it dived. This is rough water. There's no chance of locating it again."

"Don't be silly," said Mr. Limpet. "Follow me."

After the matter of the sixth submarine was disposed of, Mr. Limpet talked with Mr. Stickle again. He asked: "Well, how do you like my work?"

"It's okay," said Mr. Stickle. "The Commander says it's very okay."

"Will you be going ashore soon, George?"

"I hope so. And I hope I'm not kept topside too long. I belong below."

Mr. Limpet paid no attention to Mr. Stickle's complaint about being no longer in his engine-room. He explained that the glasses he had borrowed hurt his eyes and weren't quite as good as his own. When Mr. Stickle saw Bessie he wanted him to get his optician's prescription from her and have a proper pair of eyeglasses made for him.

"I tell you what," said Mr. Stickle, "I'll get the prescription before I tell her about you—just in case I can't find it by myself afterward."

"Well, I'll be going now," said Mr. Limpet.

"Going?" demanded Mr. Stickle. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I have something to do."

"You sure have something to do," announced Mr. Stickle. "You'll keep right ahead of this convoy."

"But you'll be all right for a while," Mr. Limpet pointed out.

"Whether we are or whether we aren't," said Mr. Stickle, "that's where you're going."

"I can't, George. Not right away. I won't be gone long."

"You won't be gone a minute."

"But I——"

"Look here," said Mr. Stickle, "did you join the Navy or didn't you?"

"Of course I did."

"Do you remember your oath?"

"Certainly."

"Has this other thing you say you've got to do any connection with your duty?"

"Well—no."

"All right, then, Lieutenant Limpet. You've got your orders. Follow them."

For an instant it was a question of whether or not Mr. Limpet was going to obey. Then Lieutenant Limpet made the decision. Dutifully, but with resentment, he swam away and took up his position at the head of the convoy.

He hadn't counted on any such thing as this. He had told Ladyfish he would be back as soon as he could. Literally, that promise would hold true. But it might be a long time before he was able to carry it out.

It was quite a long time.

It wasn't a matter of hours, or even days, or even weeks, but of months. Mr. Limpet wasn't sure but what it was years. It may well have been years. And all the time he kept thinking of Ladyfish waiting there by the sunken liner—if she was waiting.

Several times he was on the point of rebellion. He didn't

mind working hard for his country, but he minded being kept at it so everlastingly that he had no time to himself at all. Not even time to make up his mind about being unfaithful to Bessie.

But then he was just as glad of that, because it was a distressing problem. At moments Mr. Limpet wondered if it was worth the effort of deciding.

Once he protested to Mr. Stickle and demanded a leave of absence.

Mr. Stickle, who was standing by the rail of the destroyer reading a newspaper, was shocked. He had not been to land since the day he was appointed liaison officer between Mr. Limpet and the Navy. No one else had any such thing as a leave of absence these days. The world was afire and they were trying to put it out.

"Well," grumbled Mr. Limpet, "you can at least tell me if we're putting it out. Every time I ask you all you say is: 'We're doing all right.'"

"You aren't supposed to know everything," Mr. Stickle told him. "It's better."

"And I haven't seen a newspaper in so long I can't remember," complained Mr. Limpet. "I can't find any out here, and you won't show me those other ships bring out. Like you're reading now."

"Are you on that again?" asked Mr. Stickle. "I don't see what you're yawping about. Look at me. I'm an engineer, not a nursemaid to a fish." Mr. Stickle had dropped all pretense now about hurting Mr. Limpet's feelings. The war was telling on his nerves, just as it was on those of Mr. Limpet.

"You needn't be abusive," said Mr. Limpet.

"Well, I feel like being abusive." Mr. Stickle glanced toward the bridge. "Me, all the time with topside sailors. Hey!"

Mr. Stickle's exclamation was caused by a gust of wind which tore the newspaper from his hands. The paper, scattering into many sections, traveled over the water and landed, like large snowflakes, all about where Mr. Limpet was swimming.

Mr. Limpet laughed gleefully.

"Don't you read it!" Mr. Stickle roared. "That's an order!"

But Mr. Limpet pretended not to hear. He felt he had a right to know a few things. The reluctance of the Navy to let him see any newspapers had long alarmed him. He was sure it might mean that things weren't going well at all, that the Navy didn't want to discourage him. He didn't see how this could be, because of all the enemies he had accounted for. But nevertheless it was with some apprehension that he searched out the front page and glanced at the headlines: He read:

SECRET SEA WEAPON
DEFEATING NAZIS

It was interesting to know that the Navy had a secret weapon. Mr. Limpet wondered what it could be. He had heard nothing of it. He went on to read the account of the secret weapon.

There was no slightest description of it. Which was natural, of course. The account said only that with the weapon enemy submarines and ships could be located with ease and that the Atlantic was now fast being cleared of them.

Mr. Limpet was reflecting that it was strange he knew nothing of this when suddenly a suspicion came to him. As he turned on Mr. Stickle, who was still futilely ordering him not to read the paper, the suspicion became a certainty.

"This secret sea weapon," he said.

"Well, what about it?" demanded Mr. Stickle.

"It's me."

"You think pretty much of yourself. And you don't even use good grammar." In spite of the gruff tone with which Mr. Stickle said this, he was rattled, for he chewed at both ends of his mustache at once.

"George, if you don't tell me, the Navy is going to lose its secret weapon."

"You can't——"

"George!"

Mr. Stickle muttered, then admitted: "All right, it's you."

"But it doesn't say anything about me."

"We don't want to give away our secrets, do we? That's why nothing's been said about it until now."

"It might have said I invented it, or mentioned my name, or something."

"Are you looking only for glory?" Mr. Stickle wanted to know.

"No," said Mr. Limpet, "but when a man does something, he gets his name in the paper."

"Listen," said Mr. Stickle. "I wasn't supposed to let you know. And how could we put your name in the paper? How could we explain you—a dead man, a fish—even if we wanted to? Answer me that."

Mr. Limpet saw the logic in this. "I suppose so," he said sorrowfully. "But won't it ever come out?"

"You got me there," said Mr. Stickle. "Maybe after the war's over."

It was after Hitler's talk with Mr. Limpet that historians were to note that the German leader's drives and ferocity lacked their old power. Mr. Limpet never thought that the conversation had much to do with the collapse of Germany. Neither was he egotistical enough to assume that his work in the Atlantic Ocean was entirely responsible for the winning of the war. When it came, he was filled more with jubilation for an entirely different thing.

Finally he could hunt up Ladyfish.

Before he had the opportunity to do so, however, the Navy had some orders to give him.

Mr. Stickle, reading from an official document, informed him of these. In recognition of his exceptional services the government was going to call all its scientists together for an effort to be made to change Mr. Limpet back into a man. It was reasoned that because he was once a man who had been

turned into a fish, it was therefore possible to turn a fish back into a man.

Mr. Limpet was ordered, in a week's time, to present himself at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. There the scientists would place him in a specially prepared tank, examine him, consider a method of procedure, and carry it out.

Before he was due to report to receive this award, Mr. Stickle had arranged for him to see Bessie, who would meet him at the Coney Island pier. This announcement was the first Mr. Limpet knew that while he was busy with the British, Mr. Stickle had been to land and seen Bessie. He wanted to know: "How did she take it?"

Mr. Stickle revealed that the first time he mentioned the subject to Bessie, she had thrown him out. The second time she had called the police. The third time she fainted. All along she had refused to part with Mr. Limpet's eyeglass prescription, finally saying that if there were to be any new eyeglasses she would deliver them in person.

"That," Mr. Stickle recounted, "is because she said if you were alive it meant there was another woman. Is there?"

To cover his confusion, Mr. Limpet asked: "Is there what?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Well—not exactly," said Mr. Limpet.

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'?"

"You wouldn't understand, George."

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

"Do you think," Mr. Limpet said to change the subject and take up another that worried him, "they can make me into a human being again?"

Mr. Stickle, where he was standing on the deck of the destroyer, looked about. There was no one else in sight. Mr. Stickle leaned over the rail, chewed at his mustache, lowered his voice to a whisper, and said: "They know damn well they can't."

"What?" cried Mr. Limpet.

"Not so loud," Mr. Stickle cautioned. He looked about again. "Listen, Henry, don't go near the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Changing you back to a man is just a trick to get you there. They want to get rid of you. They figure they can't afford to have you around, for fear that you should ever show yourself and talk. Why, the whole administration would fall to pieces if it ever got out. Because nobody would believe it. People would only laugh. That's why the men who have seen you will never say anything."

"What would the government do with me if I took its offer?"

"There's a guy from a fish zoo or something who wants you. They'll turn you over to him. He'll keep you around for a while, looking at you, and then you'll be stuffed."

"That's a fine thing," observed Mr. Limpet with censure.

"I know you expected medals and a parade," Mr. Stickle commiserated.

"I don't mind not getting those so much," Mr. Limpet said. "It's the *stuffing*."

"You can't blame the government, Henry."

"Maybe," said Mr. Limpet, "I can't. Does Bessie know this?"

"Not a word. And you can't mention anything about yourself to her or she'll holler. Not that it would do her any good."

"Well, thanks for telling me, George."

"Forget it. What I know is putting me in a spot where they're making me chief engineer of a cruiser. I'm doing all right. Except," he reflected, "there's two Claras now."

"That's fine, George. I mean about the cruiser."

"And, Henry——"

"Yes, George?"

"When you see Bessie I wouldn't worry too much about being married to her. After all, what could you do about it now?" Mr. Stickle waited a moment and then asked: "Is she pretty?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, yes, you do."

Mr. Limpet admitted: "She's beautiful."

Mr. Stickle beamed and laughed. "Well, good fishing, Henry!"

It was all very well, Mr. Limpet reflected, as he hurried to search out Ladyfish, for George Stickle to tell him not to worry about being married to Bessie. Mr. Stickle didn't have his deep sense of good morals.

The problem was still an acute one for Mr. Limpet. Unless he had a very strong reason for following such a course, he knew he would not be able to do it. And not just a stimulus, such as the great appeal of Ladyfish, but a basis of ethics which would allow his conscience not to bother him.

Mr. Limpet was very fearful that Ladyfish would not be there at the sunken liner where he had left her so long ago. He was worried on another score, too. Ladyfish had said there were not many of their kind; but there *were* others. What if she had found someone else meanwhile?

Mr. Limpet increased his speed not only to be sure to have time to get to Ladyfish before keeping his appointment with Bessie, but to find out the answer to this horrible question.

He saw the liner long before he saw Ladyfish. There it lay, flat on its keel, as if sailing proudly along on the bottom of the ocean.

And there, at one side of it as if on guard over their rendezvous, was Ladyfish. She kept looking in the direction in which Mr. Limpet had left her. Then Mr. Limpet knew that she had been here all this time, always watching for him to return.

As he approached from a somewhat different direction now, she didn't see him. He let out his thrumming noise, singing it with happiness.

Ladyfish turned in a flash. She saw him. But she didn't dash forward to meet him. She stayed where she was, and when Mr. Limpet came up, to nose her so hard that he pushed her backward, she said nothing.

Great tears dropped from her eyes, drifting back down her body and seeming to wash out the colors of her wonderful tail, which did not glow.

Alarmed, Mr. Limpet asked: "What's the matter? Ladyfish, what's the trouble?"

Ladyfish found her voice. "It's just that I'm so glad to see you I have to cry."

"Then there hasn't—there's been no one else?"

Sobbing, Ladyfish shook her head. "N-no one."

Mr. Limpet swept himself to her side. There he quivered by her, to comfort her. After a time Ladyfish began quivering too, and the colors in her tail began to show, gradually, then more brilliantly until they were brightly afire.

"You're coming with me now?" she inquired softly.

Mr. Limpet sighed and told her: "I don't know."

Ladyfish stopped quivering a little. "You were gone all that time, Limpet, and you still don't know?"

"I know some of it," he said, "but not quite all. Not the most important thing. I have to make a trip to find that out. You can come with me. In fact, you'd better. Then you can see for yourself."

"I'll go with you, Limpet." Ladyfish sounded resigned to the necessity of seeing this thing through.

They started out, and on the way to Coney Island Mr. Limpet tried to explain it to her.

It was with some apprehension that he told her he had once been a human being. But Ladyfish was so glad to have him back that this seemed to make no difference to her. She expressed sympathy that he had ever been in this condition, but appeared to be quite satisfied with him as he was now.

He told her about Bessie, and that when he was a human being he was married to her, endeavoring to explain what this meant.

All Ladyfish wanted to know was: "Do you want to go back to her?"

"I want to be with you."

"Then we needn't speak of it any more."

It troubled Mr. Limpet to think that she had no comprehension of the fact that a married couple were required to remain faithful to each other. Love in her world appeared to be quite a different matter from what it was in the human world.

"After we are—if we're together," he inquired, "will you ever want to leave me?"

"Never," she replied, "as long as you don't leave me. It's always the males who leave in our species. That's why there are so few of us."

"In that case," he said, "there may be more."

It was raining when they reached Coney Island and came to the pier. Mr. Limpet was glad of this, because it meant there would be no other people about, and because, with the surface of the water splattered and disturbed, it would be difficult for Bessie to see that he had a companion.

Mr. Limpet indicated the pier to Ladyfish. "There," he said, "that's my wife."

"Oh," said Ladyfish, "yes." Clearly she was not impressed.

Mr. Limpet had to admit to himself that Bessie, standing up there under an umbrella in the rain, was not too attractive a figure. There was so much of her that a good deal of it spread out from under the covering of the umbrella, with the result that the rain dripped down her.

"You're going to choose," Ladyfish inquired, "between the two of us?" She sounded not offended, but rather indifferent, as if there could be no question of a choice.

"It isn't exactly like that," Mr. Limpet explained. "It's more than that. It's something I have to find for myself."

"Please find it quickly, Limpet. The water here is cold, and I'm getting chilly."

Ladyfish hovered just below him as Mr. Limpet braced his tail, worked his fins, and put his head out of water. "Hello, Bessie," he said.

The umbrella swooped down as if a reflex action had removed it spasmodically as a covering for Bessie. Then it went up again, shaking so much that the rain was thrown from it in large drops.

"H-Henry!"

"I've come to see you, Bessie."

"Is that you, Henry? Is it you?"

"Don't you recognize me, Bessie?"

"Well, I . . ." Bessie let out a shrill squeak. "When George told me—I didn't believe it," she stuttered. "I still didn't believe it when I came here today. There is," she faltered, "there is a resemblance."

"I'm sorry to bring you out in the rain."

"I feel weaker than wet," she told him. "Henry," she said, as if just fully realizing it and scolding him because of it, "you—you're a—a——"

"A fish," Mr. Limpet finished for her.

"To think that you're still alive, and I'm married to a—

"Fish. Do you mind, Bessie?"

"Well, it's . . ." She searched for a word and found it: "Humiliating."

Mr. Limpet felt a slight tug at his lower fin. Ladyfish already thought that there had been enough of this.

"How have you been, Bessie?"

"I've been lonely."

Mr. Limpet cleared his throat preparatory to broaching a delicate subject. "I thought you might have—well, become interested in someone else."

"You mean a man?"

"After all, Bessie, you're technically a widow."

"But I don't want anybody else," Bessie wailed. "I want you, Henry." She began to sob. "I didn't appreciate you when I had you."

"Of course you did, Bessie," Mr. Limpet told her. "I was always happy. Please don't cry."

Mr. Limpet was filled with panic at her tears. He had expected her to be shrewish, as she usually was, and from this he hoped to steel himself to the decision he wanted to make. Now to have her remorseful, tearful, and even humble made his problem much worse.

"Don't you want to come back to me, Henry?" Bessie asked. Mr. Limpet sidestepped this by pointing out: "It wouldn't be very convenient keeping me in the bathtub, Bessie."

"I suppose it wouldn't."

"And what would the neighbors think?"

"I know *them*," Bessie stated.

"So there you are."

Mr. Limpet felt a stronger tug at his lower fin. He hoped Bessie wasn't noticing anything. He still wasn't getting anywhere, and he wondered if he would. He asked: "Have you enough money, Bessie?"

"With what you left and what the government pays me," she said, "I get along very well. The government won't tell me why it gives me money."

"Well, you keep right on taking it, Bessie. Is everything else all right?"

"No, it isn't, Henry. The world doesn't seem like it was before at all."

"It doesn't?"

"The way it is now, Henry, makes you kind of scared. You don't know what's going to happen. I read the other day where somebody said it might mean the end of human beings."

Then Mr. Limpet had it.

He remembered the Devonian period.

He wished he had a foot so that he could kick himself with it for not thinking of this before.

The Devonian period gave him an ethical basis for leaving Bessie and going the whole way with Ladyfish. Of course it might not be true at all that the present human era was going to come to an end. But from what Bessie said, and the few things he had heard, Mr. Limpet decided it was nothing upon which to take a chance.

With human intelligence still contained in him, he and Ladyfish might produce something from which would evolve, if it were necessary, another race of men. As the present one had done, it would crawl from the salt sea.

Mr. Limpet felt sure that this worthy project, this insurance

for the existence of the soul, transcended all moral obligations.

As if to substantiate his decision, there came another and still stronger tug at his lower fin. Ladyfish's teeth were sharp.

"I'll have to be going, Bessie," he told his wife. "Don't forget if you ever find someone else, I won't mind."

In a tone that was much more like her old self, Bessie said: "I'm not sure I like the sound of that, Henry Limpet. I'm not sure at all. Especially as you haven't told me how it is down there."

"I get along," Mr. Limpet said.

"How can you?" Bessie asked. "Henry, have you—do you—I mean, are there any mermaids there?"

"No," said Mr. Limpet, "there aren't any mermaids." He felt a bite on his fin that hurt. "I really must go, Bessie."

"Wait!" she cried. "Your new eyeglasses."

Mr. Limpet, along with Bessie, had nearly forgotten them. Now she took them out of her purse.

"I'll swim up to the steps," Mr. Limpet said.

Holding the umbrella over herself with difficulty while she negotiated the wooden steps at the side of the pier, Bessie came down to him.

Mr. Limpet lifted himself as far out of water as he could get while she removed the eyeglasses he had found in the liner. Brokenly, Bessie said: "I'll keep these as a memento of you, Henry." She placed the new eyeglasses on his nose.

"Thank you," Mr. Limpet said. "That's fine. Just right."

Bessie reached her hand out to touch him. Suddenly she withheld it, poised in the air, while she demanded: "Henry, did I see somebody down there with you?"

Mr. Limpet swallowed. "It must have been my reflection in the water."

Bessie hesitated a moment, examining the water. "I don't see your reflection now."

"It does that sometimes," Mr. Limpet explained.

Only half satisfied, and still suspicious, Bessie continued the movement of touching him while still looking at the water beside him. But when her fingers came into contact with him,

all suspicion and concentration on the water departed. With a gasp, Bessie withdrew her hand quickly.

Mr. Limpet pretended not to notice. "Good-by, Bessie," he said. He had a slight, momentary pang at this parting, and then it was gone.

"Good-by, Henry." Bessie was weeping again.

The last picture Mr. Limpet had of her was that of her standing on the steps of the pier under her umbrella and holding her handkerchief against her mouth as she watched him swim away. He thought he heard a final cry of anguish, or perhaps of accusation, but he didn't stop to determine which it was.

He swam on with Ladyfish. She shivered at his side. At first Mr. Limpet thought this was caused by the cold. Then he saw it was a determination in Ladyfish he had never noticed before. She swam steadily and silently. Sometimes she shot a little ahead, glancing back to indicate that he should hurry to catch up with her and go faster. The colors in her tail did not glow very brightly. It was as if Ladyfish had other things to do now than parade her attractions, almost as if there was no necessity to exhibit them further.

Mr. Limpet, at this, had a moment of wondering if he was any better off than he had been when he was a human being and considered himself married to Bessie. The fleeting thought went through him that he might just as well have taken to the bathtub and let the neighbors talk as they would.

Then he discarded these unworthy feelings. Ladyfish had waited a long time. She had a right to show some impatience, even some evidences that Mr. Limpet might be hen-pecked again. Let women have their little shrewish ways. They were all the more woman for it. Besides, there was the very virtuous expectation that, in addition to the delights of their union, there might come from it the genesis of a better race to reside upon the earth.

Beside Ladyfish, keeping up with her every spurt, Mr. Limpet swam joyously, the water slicking smoothly along his scales, pushing hard against his new eyeglasses.

The Cyprian Cat¹

BY DOROTHY L. SAYERS

It's extraordinarily decent of you to come along and see me like this, Harringay. Believe me, I do appreciate it. It isn't every busy K.C. who'd do as much for such a hopeless sort of client. I only wish I could spin you a more workable kind of story, but honestly, I can only tell you exactly what I told Peabody. Of course, I can see he doesn't believe a word of it, and I don't blame him. He thinks I ought to be able to make up a more plausible tale than that—and I suppose I could, but where's the use? One's almost bound to fall down somewhere if one tries to swear to a lie. What I'm going to tell you is the absolute truth. I fired one shot and one shot only, and that was at the cat. It's funny that one should be hanged for shooting at a cat.

Merridew and I were always the best of friends; school and

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college and all that sort of thing. We didn't see very much of each other after the war, because we were living at opposite ends of the country; but we met in town from time to time and wrote occasionally and each of us knew that the other was there in the background, so to speak. Two years ago, he wrote and told me he was getting married. He was just turned forty and the girl was fifteen years younger, and he was tremendously in love. It gave me a bit of a jolt—you know how it is when your friends marry. You feel they will never be quite the same again; and I'd got used to the idea that Merridew and I were cut out to be old bachelors. But of course I congratulated him and sent him a wedding present, and I did sincerely hope he'd be happy. He was obviously over head and ears; almost dangerously so, I thought, considering all things. Though except for the difference of age it seemed suitable enough. He told me he had met her at—of all places—a rectory garden-party down in Norfolk, and that she had actually never been out of her native village. I mean, literally—not so much as a trip to the nearest town. I'm not trying to convey that she wasn't pukka, or anything like that. Her father was some queer sort of recluse—a mediaevalist, or something desperately poor. He died shortly after their marriage.

I didn't see anything of them for the first year or so. Merridew is a civil engineer, you know, and he took his wife away after the honeymoon to Liverpool, where he was doing something in connection with the harbour. It must have been a big change for her from the wilds of Norfolk. I was in Birmingham, with my nose kept pretty close to the grindstone, so we only exchanged occasional letters. His were what I can only call deliriously happy, especially at first. Later on, he seemed a little worried about his wife's health. She was restless; town life didn't suit her; he'd be glad when he could finish up his Liverpool job and get her away into the country. There wasn't any doubt about their happiness, you understand—she'd got him body and soul as they say, and as far as I could make out it was mutual. I want to make that perfectly clear.

Well, to cut a long story short, Merridew wrote to me at the

beginning of last month and said he was just off to a new job—a waterworks extension scheme down in Somerset; and he asked if I could possibly cut loose and join them there for a few weeks. He wanted to have a yarn with me, and Felice was longing to make my acquaintance. They had got rooms at the village inn. It was rather a remote spot, but there was fishing and scenery and so forth, and I should be able to keep Felice company while he was working up at the dam. I was about fed up with Birmingham, what with the heat and one thing and another, and it looked pretty good to me, and I was due for a holiday anyhow, so I fixed up to go. I had a bit of business to do in town, which I calculated would take me about a week, so I said I'd go down to Little Hexham on June 20th.

As it happened, my business in London finished itself off unexpectedly soon, and on the sixteenth I found myself absolutely free and stuck in an hotel with road-drills working just under the windows and a tar-spraying machine to make things livelier. You remember what a hot month it was—flaming June and no mistake about it. I didn't see any point in waiting, so I sent off a wire to Merridew, packed my bag and took the train for Somerset the same evening. I couldn't get a compartment to myself, but I found a first-class smoker with only three seats occupied, and stowed myself thankfully into the fourth corner. There was a military-looking old boy, an elderly female with a lot of bags and baskets, and a girl. I thought I should have a nice peaceful journey.

So I should have, if it hadn't been for the unfortunate way I'm built. It was quite all right at first—as a matter of fact, I think I was half asleep, and I only woke up properly at seven o'clock, when the waiter came to say that dinner was on. The other people weren't taking it, and when I came back from the restaurant car I found that the old boy had gone, and there were only the two women left. I settled down in my corner again, and gradually, as we went along, I found a horrible feeling creeping over me that there was a cat in the compartment somewhere. I'm one of those wretched people who can't stand cats. I don't mean just that I prefer dogs—I

mean that the presence of a cat in the same room with me makes me feel like nothing on earth. I can't describe it, but I believe quite a lot of people are affected that way. Something to do with electricity, or so they tell me. I've read that very often the dislike is mutual, but it isn't so with me. The brutes seem to find me abominably fascinating—make a bee-line for my legs every time. It's a funny sort of complaint, and it doesn't make me at all popular with dear old ladies.

Anyway, I began to feel more and more awful and I realized that the old girl at the other end of the seat must have a cat in one of her innumerable baskets. I thought of asking her to put it out in the corridor, or calling the guard and having it removed, but I knew how silly it would sound and made up my mind to try and stick it. I couldn't say the animal was misbehaving itself or anything, and she looked a pleasant old lady; it wasn't her fault that I was a freak. I tried to distract my mind by looking at the girl.

She was worth looking at, too—very slim, and dark with one of those dead-white skins that make you think of magnolia blossom. She had the most astonishing eyes, too—I've never seen eyes quite like them; a very pale brown, almost amber, set wide apart and a little slanting, and they seemed to have a kind of luminosity of their own, if you get what I mean. I don't know if this sounds—I don't want you to think I was bowled over, or anything. As a matter of fact she held no sort of attraction for me, though I could imagine a different type of man going potty about her. She was just unusual, that was all. But however much I tried to think of other things I couldn't get rid of the uncomfortable feeling, and eventually I gave it up and went out into the corridor. I just mention this because it will help you to understand the rest of the story. If you can only realize how perfectly awful I feel when there's a cat about—even when it's shut up in a basket—you'll understand better how I came to buy the revolver.

Well, we got to Hexham Junction, which was the nearest station to Little Hexham, and there was old Merridew waiting

on the platform. The girl was getting out too—but not the old lady with the cat, thank goodness—and I was just handing her traps out after her when he came galloping up and hailed us.

“Hullo!” he said. “Why, that’s splendid! Have you introduced yourselves?” So I tumbled to it then that the girl was Mrs. Merridew, who’d been up to Town on a shopping expedition, and I explained to her about my change of plans and she said how jolly it was that I could come—the usual things. I noticed what an attractive low voice she had and how graceful her movements were, and I understood—though, mind you, I didn’t share—Merridew’s infatuation.

We got into his car—Mrs. Merridew sat in the back and I got up beside Merridew, and was very glad to feel the air and to get rid of the oppressive electric feeling I’d had in the train. He told me the place suited them wonderfully, and had given Felice an absolutely new lease of life, so to speak. He said he was very fit, too, but I thought myself that he looked rather fagged and nervy.

You’d have liked that inn, Harringay. The real, old-fashioned stuff, as quaint as you make ’em, and everything genuine—none of your Tottenham Court Road antiques. We’d all had our grub, and Mrs. Merridew said she was tired; so she went up to bed early and Merridew and I had a drink and went for a stroll round the village. It’s a tiny hamlet quite at the other end of nowhere; lights out at ten, little thatched houses with pinched-up attic windows like furry ears—the place purred in its sleep. Merridew’s working gang didn’t sleep there, of course—they’d run up huts for them at the dam, a mile beyond the village.

The landlord was just locking up the bar when we came in—a block of a man with an absolutely expressionless face. His wife was a thin, sandy-haired woman who looked as though she was too downtrodden to open her mouth. But I found out afterwards that was a mistake, for one evening when he’d taken one or two over the eight and showed signs of wanting to make a night of it, his wife sent him off upstairs with a gesture and a look that took the heart out of him. That first night she was

sitting in the porch, and hardly glanced at us as we passed her. I always thought her an uncomfortable kind of woman, but she certainly kept her house most exquisitely neat and clean.

They'd given me a noble bedroom, close under the eaves with a long, low casement window overlooking the garden. The sheets smelt of lavender, and I was between them and asleep almost before you could count ten. I was tired, you see. But later in the night I woke up. I was too hot, so took off some of the blankets and then strolled across to the window to get a breath of air. The garden was bathed in moonshine and on the lawn I could see something twisting and turning oddly. I stared a bit before I made it out to be two cats. They didn't worry me at that distance, and I watched them for a bit before I turned in again. They were rolling over one another and jumping away again and chasing their own shadows on the grass, intent on their own mysterious business—taking themselves seriously, the way cats always do. It looked like a kind of ritual dance. Then something seemed to startle them, and they scampered away.

I went back to bed, but I couldn't get to sleep again. My nerves seemed to be all on edge. I lay watching the window and listening to a kind of soft rustling noise that seemed to be going on in the big wisteria that ran along my side of the house. And then something landed with a soft thud on the sill—a great Cyprian cat.

What did you say? Well, one of those striped grey and black cats. Tabby, that's right. In my part of the country they call them Cyprus cats, or Cyprian cats. I'd never seen such a monster. It stood with its head cocked sideways, staring into the room and rubbing its ears very softly against the upright bar of the casement.

Of course, I couldn't do with that. I shooed the brute away, and it made off without a sound. Heat or no heat, I shut and fastened the window. Far out in the shrubbery I thought I heard a faint miauling; then silence. After that, I went straight off to sleep again and lay like a log till the girl came in to call me.

The next day, Merridew ran us up in his car to see the place where they were making the dam, and that was the first time I realized that Felice's nerviness had not been altogether cured. He showed us where they had diverted part of the river into a swift little stream that was to be used for working the dynamo of an electrical plant. There were a couple of planks laid across the stream, and he wanted to take us over to show us the engine. It wasn't extraordinarily wide or dangerous, but Mrs. Merridew peremptorily refused to cross it, and got quite hysterical when he tried to insist. Eventually he and I went over and inspected the machinery by ourselves. When we got back she had recovered her temper and apologized for being so silly. Merridew abased himself, of course, and I began to feel a little *de trop*. She told me afterwards that she had once fallen into the river as a child, and been nearly drowned, and it had left her with a what d'ye call it—complex about running water. And but for this one trifling episode, I never heard a single sharp word pass between them all the time I was there; nor, for a whole week, did I notice anything else to suggest a flaw in Mrs. Merridew's radiant health. Indeed, as the days wore on to midsummer and the heat grew more intense, her whole body seemed to glow with vitality. It was as though she was lit up from within.

Merridew was out all day and working very hard. I thought he was overdoing it and asked him if he was sleeping badly. He told me that, on the contrary, he fell asleep every night the moment his head touched the pillow, and—what was most unusual with him—had no dreams of any kind. I myself felt well enough, but the hot weather made me languid and disinclined for exertion. Mrs. Merridew took me out for long drives in the car. I would sit for hours, lulled into a half-slumber by the rush of warm air and the purring of the engine, and gazing at my driver, upright at the wheel, her eyes fixed unwaveringly upon the spinning road. We explored the whole of the country to the south and east of Little Hexham, and once or twice went as far north as Bath. Once I suggested that we should turn eastward over the bridge and run down into what looked like

rather beautiful wooded country, but Mrs. Merridew didn't care for the idea; she said it was a bad road and that the scenery on that side was disappointing.

Altogether, I spent a pleasant week at Little Hexham, and if it had not been for the cats I should have been perfectly comfortable. Every night the garden seemed to be haunted by them—the Cyprian cat that I had seen the first night of my stay, and a little ginger one and a horrible stinking black Tom were especially tiresome, and one night there was a terrified white kitten that mewed for an hour on end under my window. I flung boots and books at my visitors till I was heartily weary, but they seemed determined to make the inn garden their rendezvous. The nuisance grew worse from night to night; on one occasion I counted fifteen of them, sitting on their hinder-ends in a circle, while the Cyprian cat danced her shadow-dance among them, working in and out like a weaver's shuttle. I had to keep my window shut, for the Cyprian cat evidently made a habit of climbing up by the wisteria. The door, too; for once when I had gone down to fetch something from the sitting room, I found her on my bed, kneading the coverlet with her paws—pr'rp, pr'rp, pr'rp—with her eyes closed in a sensuous ecstasy. I beat her off, and she spat at me as she fled into the dark passage.

I asked the landlady about her, but she replied rather curtly that they kept no cat at the inn, and it is true that I never saw any of the beasts in the daytime; but one evening about dusk I caught the landlord in one of the outhouses. He had the ginger cat on his shoulder, and was feeding her with something that looked like strips of liver. I remonstrated with him for encouraging the cats about the place and asked whether I could have a different room, explaining that the nightly cater-wauling disturbed me. He half opened his slits of eyes and murmured that he would ask his wife about it; but nothing was done, and in fact I believe there was no other bedroom in the house.

And all this time the weather got hotter and heavier, working up for thunder, with the sky like brass and the earth like

iron, and the air quivering over it so that it hurt your eyes to look at it.

All right, Harringay—I am trying to keep to the point. And I'm not concealing anything from you. I say that my relations with Mrs. Merridew were perfectly ordinary. Of course I saw a good deal of her, because as I explained Merridew was out all day. We went up to the dam with him in the morning and brought the car back, and naturally we had to amuse one another as best we could till the evening. She seemed quite pleased to be in my company, and I couldn't dislike her. I can't tell you what we talked about—nothing in particular. She was not a talkative woman. She would sit or lie for hours in the sunshine, hardly speaking—only stretching out her body to the light and heat. Sometimes she would spend a whole afternoon playing with a twig or a pebble, while I sat by and smoked. Restful! No. No—I shouldn't call her a restful personality, exactly. Not to me, at any rate. In the evening she would liven up and talk a little more, but she generally went up to bed early, and left Merridew and me to yarn together in the garden.

Oh! about the revolver. Yes. I bought that in Bath, when I had been at Little Hexham exactly a week. We drove over in the morning, and while Mrs. Merridew got some things for her husband, I prowled round the second-hand shops. I had intended to get an air-gun or a pea-shooter or something of that kind, when I saw this. You've seen it, of course. It's very tiny—what people in books describe as "little more than a toy," but quite deadly enough. The old boy who sold it to me didn't seem to know much about firearms. He'd taken it in pawn some time back, he told me, and there were ten rounds of ammunition with it. He made no bones about a license or anything—glad enough to make a sale, no doubt, without putting difficulties in a customer's way. I told him I knew how to handle it, and mentioned by way of a joke that I meant to take a pot-shot or two at the cats. That seemed to wake him up a bit. He was a dried-up little fellow, with a scrawny grey beard and a

stringy neck. He asked me where I was staying. I told him at Little Hexham.

"You better be careful, sir," he said. "They think a heap of their cats down there, and it's reckoned unlucky to kill them." And then he added something I couldn't quite catch, about a silver bullet. He was a doddering old fellow, and he seemed to have some sort of scruple about letting me take the parcel away, but I assured him that I was perfectly capable of looking after it and myself. I left him standing in the door of his shop, pulling at his beard and staring after me.

That night the thunder came. The sky had turned to lead before evening, but the dull heat was more oppressive than the sunshine. Both the Merridews seemed to be in a state of nerves—he sulky and swearing at the weather and the flies, and she wrought up to a queer kind of vivid excitement. Thunder affects some people that way. I wasn't much better, and to make things worse I got the feeling that the house was full of cats. I couldn't see them but I knew they were there, lurking behind the cupboards and flitting noiselessly about the corridors. I could scarcely sit in the parlour and I was thankful to escape to my room. Cats or no cats, I had to open the window, and I sat there with my pyjama jacket unbuttoned, trying to get a breath of air. But the place was like the inside of a copper furnace. And pitch-dark. I could scarcely see from my window where the bushes ended and the lawn began. But I could hear and feel the cats. There were little scrapings in the wisteria and scufflings among the leaves, and about eleven o'clock one of them started the concert with a loud and hideous wail. Then another and another joined in—I'll swear there were fifty of them. And presently I got that foul sensation of nausea, and the flesh crawled on my bones, and I knew that one of them was slinking close to me in the darkness. I looked round quickly, and there she stood, the great Cyprian, right against my shoulder, her eyes glowing like green lamps. I yelled and struck out at her, and she snarled as she leaped out and down. I heard her thump the gravel, and the yowling burst out all over the garden with renewed vehemence. And then all in a

moment there was utter silence, and in the far distance there came a flickering blue flash and then another. In the first of them I saw the far garden wall, topped along all its length with cats, like a nursery frieze. When the second flash came the wall was empty.

At two o'clock the rain came. For three hours before that I had sat there, watching the lightning as it spat across the sky and exulting in the crash of the thunder. The storm seemed to carry off all the electrical disturbance in my body; I could have shouted with excitement and relief. Then the first heavy drops fell; then a steady downpour; then a deluge. It struck the iron-baked garden with a noise like steel rods falling. The smell of the ground came up intoxicatingly, and the wind rose and flung the rain in against my face. At the other end of the passage I heard a window thrown to and fastened, but I leaned out into the tumult and let the water drench my head and shoulders. The thunder still rumbled intermittently, but with less noise and farther off, and in an occasional flash I saw the white grille of falling water drawn between me and the garden.

It was after one of these thunder-peals that I became aware of a knocking at my door. I opened it, and there was Merri-dew. He had a candle in his hand, and his face was terrified.

"Felice!" he said abruptly. "She's ill. I can't wake her. For God's sake, come and give me a hand."

I hurried down the passage after him. There were two beds in his room—a great four-poster, hung with crimson damask, and a small camp bedstead drawn up near to the window. The small bed was empty, the bedclothes tossed aside; evidently he had just risen from it. In the four-poster lay Mrs. Merridew, naked, with only a sheet upon her. She was stretched flat upon her back, her long black hair in two plaits over her shoulders. Her face was waxen and shrunk, like the face of a corpse, and her pulse, when I felt it, was so faint that at first I could scarcely feel it. Her breathing was very slow and shallow and her flesh cold. I shook her, but there was no response at all. I lifted her eyelids, and noticed how the eyeballs were turned up under the upper lid, so that only the whites were visible. The touch

of my finger-tip upon the sensitive ball evoked no reaction. I immediately wondered whether she took drugs.

Merridew seemed to think it necessary to make some explanation. He was babbling about the heat—she couldn't bear so much as a silk nightgown—she had suggested that he should occupy the other bed—he had slept heavily—right through the thunder. The rain blowing in on his face had aroused him. He had got up and shut the window. Then he called to Felice to know if she was all right—he thought the storm might have frightened her. There was no answer. He had struck a light. Her condition had alarmed him—and so on.

I told him to pull himself together and to try whether, by chafing his wife's hands and feet, we could restore the circulation. I had it firmly in my mind that she was under the influence of some opiate. We set to work, rubbing and pinching and slapping her with wet towels and shouting her name in her ear. It was like handling a dead woman, except for the very slight but perfectly regular rise and fall of her bosom, on which—with a kind of surprise that there should be any flaw on its magnolia whiteness—I noticed a large brown mole, just over the heart. To my perturbed fancy it suggested a wound and a menace. We had been hard at it for some time, with the sweat pouring off us, when we became aware of something going on outside the window—a stealthy bumping and scraping against the panes. I snatched up the candle and looked out.

On the sill, the Cyprian cat sat and clawed at the casement. Her drenched fur clung limply to her body, her eyes glared into mine, her mouth was opened in protest. She scrabbled furiously at the latch, her hind claws slipping and scratching on the woodwork. I hammered on the pane and bawled at her, and she struck back at the glass as though possessed. As I cursed her and turned away she set up a long, despairing wail.

Merridew called to me to bring back the candle and leave the brute alone. I returned to the bed, but the dismal crying went on and on incessantly. I suggested to Merridew that he should wake the landlord and get hot-water bottles and some brandy from the bar and see if a messenger could not be sent

for a doctor. He departed on this errand, while I went on with my massage. It seemed to me that the pulse was growing still fainter. Then I suddenly recollected that I had a small brandy-flask in my bag. I ran out to fetch it, and as I did so the cat suddenly stopped its howling.

As I entered my own room the air blowing through the open window struck gratefully upon me. I found my bag in the dark and was rummaging for the flask among my shirts and socks when I heard a loud, triumphant mew, and turned round in time to see the Cyprian cat crouched for a moment on the sill, before it sprang in past me and out at the door. I found the flask and hastened back with it, just as Merridew and the landlord came running up the stairs.

We all went into the room together. As we did so, Mrs. Merridew stirred, sat up, and asked us what in the world was the matter.

I have seldom felt quite such a fool.

Next day the weather was cooler; the storm had cleared the air. What Merridew had said to his wife I do not know. None of us made any public allusion to the night's disturbance, and to all appearance Mrs. Merridew was in the best of health and spirits. Merridew took a day off from the waterworks, and we all went for a long drive and picnic together. We were on the best of terms with one another. Ask Merridew—he will tell you the same thing. He would not—he could not, surely—say otherwise. I can't believe, Harringay, I simply cannot believe that he would imagine or suspect me—I say, there was nothing to suspect. Nothing.

Yes—this is the important date—the 24th of June. I can't tell you any more details; there is nothing to tell. We came back and had dinner just as usual. All three of us were together all day, till bedtime. On my honour I had no private interview of any kind that day, either with him or with her. I was the first to go to bed, and I heard the others come upstairs about half an hour later. They were talking cheerfully.

It was a moonlight night. For once, no caterwauling came

to trouble me. I didn't even bother to shut the window or the door. I put the revolver on the chair beside me before I lay down. Yes, it was loaded. I had no special object in putting it there, except that I meant to have a go at the cats if they started their games again.

I was desperately tired, and thought I should drop off to sleep at once, but I didn't. I must have been overtired, I suppose. I lay and looked at the moonlight. And then, about midnight, I heard what I had been half expecting: a stealthy scrabbling in the wisteria and a faint miauling sound.

I sat up in bed and reached for the revolver. I heard the "plop" as the big cat sprang up on to the window-ledge; I saw her black and silver flanks, and the outline of her round head, pricked ears and upright tail. I aimed and fired, and the beast let out one frightful cry and sprang down into the room.

I jumped out of bed. The crack of the shot had sounded terrific in the silent house, and somewhere I heard a distant voice call out. I pursued the cat into the passage, revolver in hand—with some idea of finishing it off, I suppose. And then, at the door of the Merridews' room, I saw Mrs. Merridew. She stood with one hand on each door-post, swaying to and fro. Then she fell down at my feet. Her bare breast was all stained with blood. And as I stood staring at her clutching the revolver, Merridew came out and found us—like that.

Well, Harringay, that's my story, exactly as I told it to Peabody. I'm afraid it won't sound very well in Court, but what can I say? The trail of blood led from my room to hers; the cat must have run that way; I *know* it was the cat I shot. I can't offer any explanation. I don't know who shot Mrs. Merridew, or why. I can't help it if the people at the inn say they never saw the Cyprian cat; Merridew saw it that other night, and I know he wouldn't lie about it. Search the house, Harringay—that's the only thing to do. Pull the place to pieces, till you find the body of the Cyprian cat. It will have my bullet in it.

Tarnhelm¹

BY HUGH WALPOLE

I was, I suppose, at that time a peculiar child, peculiar a little by nature, but also because I had spent so much of my young life in the company of people very much older than myself.

After the events that I am now going to relate, some quite indelible mark was set on me. I became then, and have always been since, one of those persons, otherwise insignificant, who have decided, without possibility of change, about certain questions.

Some things, doubted by most of the world, are for these people true and beyond argument; this certainty of theirs gives them a kind of stamp, as though they lived so much in their imagination as to have very little assurance as to what is fact and what fiction. This "oddness" of theirs puts them apart. If now, at the age of fifty, I am a man with very few friends, very

¹From *All Souls' Night*, by Hugh Walpole. Copyright, 1933, by Doubleday & Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, and Macmillan & Co., Ltd., London.

much alone, it is because, if you like, my Uncle Robert died in a strange manner forty years ago and I was a witness of his death.

I have never until now given any account of the strange proceedings that occurred at Faildyke Hall on the evening of Christmas Eve in the year 1890. The incidents of that evening are still remembered very clearly by one or two people, and a kind of legend of my Uncle Robert's death has been carried on into the younger generation. But no one still alive was a witness of them as I was, and I feel it is time that I set them down upon paper.

I write them down without comment. I extenuate nothing; I disguise nothing. I am not, I hope, in any way a vindictive man, but my brief meeting with my Uncle Robert and the circumstances of his death gave my life, even at that early age, a twist difficult for me very readily to forgive.

As to the so-called supernatural element in my story, everyone must judge for himself about that. We deride or we accept according to our natures. If we are built of a certain solid practical material the probability is that no evidence, however definite, however firsthand, will convince us. If dreams are our daily portion, one dream more or less will scarcely shake our sense of reality.

However, to my story.

My father and mother were in India from my eighth to my thirteenth years. I did not see them, except on two occasions when they visited England. I was an only child, loved dearly by both my parents, who, however, loved one another yet more. They were an exceedingly sentimental couple of the old-fashioned kind. My father was in the Indian Civil Service, and wrote poetry. He even had his epic, *Tantalus: A Poem in Four Cantos*, published at his own expense.

This, added to the fact that my mother had been considered an invalid before he married her, made my parents feel that they bore a very close resemblance to the Brownings and my father even had a pet name for my mother that sounded curiously like the famous and hideous "Ba."

I was a delicate child, was sent to Mr. Ferguson's Private Academy at the tender age of eight, and spent my holidays as the rather unwanted guest of various relations.

"Unwanted" because I was, I imagine, a difficult child to understand. I had an old grandmother who lived at Folkestone, two aunts who shared a little house in Kensington, an aunt, uncle and a brood of cousins inhabiting Cheltenham, and two uncles who lived in Cumberland. All of these relations, except the two uncles, had their proper share of me and for none of them had I any great affection.

Children were not studied in those days as they are now. I was thin, pale and bespectacled, aching for affection but not knowing at all how to obtain it; outwardly undemonstrative, but inwardly emotional and sensitive, playing games, because of my poor sight, very badly, reading a great deal more than was good for me, and telling myself stories all day and part of every night.

All of my relations tired of me, I fancy, in turn, and at last it was decided that my uncles in Cumberland must do their share. These two were my father's brothers, the eldest of a long family of which he was the youngest. My Uncle Robert, I understood, was nearly seventy, my Uncle Constance some five years younger. I remember always thinking that Constance was a funny name for a man.

My Uncle Robert was the owner of Faildyke Hall, a country house between the lake of Wastwater and the little town of Seascale on the seacoast. Uncle Constance had lived with Uncle Robert for many years. It was decided, after some family correspondence, that the Christmas of this year, 1890, should be spent by me at Faildyke Hall.

I was at this time just eleven years old, thin and skinny, with a bulging forehead, large spectacles and a nervous, shy manner. I always set out, I remember, on any new adventures with mingled emotions of terror and anticipation. Maybe *this* time the miracle would occur: I should discover a friend or a fortune, should cover myself with glory in some unexpected way; be at last what I always longed to be, a hero.

I was glad that I was not going to any of my other relations for Christmas, and especially not to my cousins at Cheltenham, who teased and persecuted me and were never free of ear-splitting noises. What I wanted most in life was to be allowed to read in peace. I understood that at Faildyke there was a glorious library.

My aunt saw me into the train. I had been presented by my uncle with one of the most gory of Harrison Ainsworth's romances, "The Lancashire Witches," and I had five bars of chocolate cream, so that journey was as blissfully happy as any experience could be to me at that time. I was permitted to read in peace, and I had just then little more to ask of life.

Nevertheless, as the train puffed its way north, this new country began to force itself on my attention. I had never before been in the North of England, and I was not prepared for the sudden sense of space and freshness that I received.

The naked, unsystematic hills, the freshness of the wind on which the birds seemed to be carried with especial glee, the stone walls that ran like gray ribbons about the moors, and, above all, the vast expanse of sky upon whose surface clouds swam, raced, eddied and extended as I had never anywhere witnessed . . .

I sat, lost and absorbed, at my carriage window, and when at last, long after dark had fallen, I heard "Seascale" called by the porter, I was still staring in a sort of romantic dream. When I stepped out on to the little narrow platform and was greeted by the salt tang of the sea wind my first real introduction to the North Country may be said to have been completed. I am writing now in another part of that same Cumberland country, and beyond my window the line of the fell runs strong and bare against the sky, while below it the Lake lies, a fragment of silver glass at the feet of Skiddaw.

It may be that my sense of the deep mystery of this country had its origin in this same strange story that I am now relating. But again perhaps not, for I believe that that first evening arrival at Seascale worked some change in me, so that since then none of the world's beauties—from the crimson waters of

Kashmir to the rough glories of our own Cornish coast—can rival for me the sharp, peaty winds and strong, resilient turf of the Cumberland hills.

That was a magical drive in the pony-trap to Faildyke that evening. It was bitterly cold, but I did not seem to mind it. Everything was magical to me.

From the first I could see the great slow hump of Black Combe jet against the frothy clouds of the winter night, and I could hear the sea breaking and the soft rustle of the bare twigs in the hedgerows.

I made, too, the friend of my life that night, for it was Bob Armstrong who was driving the trap. He has often told me since (for although he is a slow man of few words he likes to repeat the things that seem to him worth while) that I struck him as “pitifully lost” that evening on the Seascale platform. I looked, I don’t doubt, pinched and cold enough. In any case it was a lucky appearance for me, for I won Armstrong’s heart there and then, and he, once he gave it, could never bear to take it back again.

He, on his side, seemed to me gigantic that night. He had, I believe, one of the broadest chests in the world: it was a curse to him, he said, because no ready-made shirts would ever suit him.

I sat in close to him because of the cold; he was very warm, and I could feel his heart beating like a steady clock inside his rough coat. It beat for me that night, and it has beaten for me, I’m glad to say, ever since.

In truth, as things turned out, I needed a friend. I was nearly asleep and stiff all over my little body when I was handed down from the trap and at once led into what seemed to me an immense hall crowded with the staring heads of slaughtered animals and smelling of straw.

I was so sadly weary that my uncles, when I met them in a vast billiard-room in which a great fire roared in a stone fireplace like a demon, seemed to me to be double.

In any case, what an odd pair they were! My Uncle Robert was a little man with gray untidy hair and little sharp eyes

hooded by two of the bushiest eyebrows known to humanity. He wore (I remember as though it were yesterday) shabby country clothes of a faded green color, and he had on one finger a ring with a thick red stone.

Another thing that I noticed at once when he kissed me (I detested to be kissed by anybody) was a faint scent that he had, connected at once in my mind with the caraway-seeds that there are in seed-cake. I noticed, too, that his teeth were discolored and yellow.

My Uncle Constance I liked at once. He was fat, round, friendly and clean. Rather a dandy was Uncle Constance. He wore a flower in his buttonhole and his linen was snowy white in contrast with his brother's.

I noticed one thing, though, at that very first meeting, and that was that before he spoke to me and put his fat arm around my shoulder he seemed to look toward his brother as though for permission. You may say that it was unusual for a boy of my age to notice so much, but in fact I noticed everything at that time. Years and laziness, alas! have slackened my observation.

I had a horrible dream that night; it woke me screaming, and brought Bob Armstrong in to quiet me.

My room was large, like all the other rooms that I had seen, and empty, with a great expanse of floor and a stone fireplace like the one in the billiard-room. It was, I afterwards found, next to the servants' quarters. Armstrong's room was next to mine, and Mrs. Spender's, the housekeeper's, beyond his.

Armstrong was then, and is yet, a bachelor. He used to tell me that he loved so many women that he never could bring his mind to choose any one of them. And now he has been too long my personal body-guard and is too lazily used to my ways to change his condition. He is, moreover, seventy years of age.

Well, what I saw in my dream was this. They had lit a fire for me (and it was necessary; the room was of an icy coldness)

and I dreamt that I awoke to see the flames rise to a last vigor before they died away. In the brilliance of that illumination I was conscious that something was moving in the room. I heard the movement for some little while before I saw anything.

I sat up, my heart hammering, and then to my horror discerned, slinking against the farther wall, the evillest-looking yellow mongrel of a dog that you can fancy.

I find it difficult, I have always found it difficult, to describe exactly the horror of that yellow dog. It lay partly in its color, which was vile, partly in its mean and bony body, but for the most part in its evil head—flat, with sharp little eyes and jagged yellow teeth.

As I looked at it, it bared those teeth at me and then began to creep, with an indescribably loathsome action, in the direction of my bed. I was at first stiffened with terror. Then as it neared the bed, its little eyes fixed upon me and its teeth bared, I screamed again and again.

The next I knew was that Armstrong was sitting on my bed, his strong arm about my trembling little body. All I could say over and over was, "The Dog! the Dog! the Dog!"

He soothed me as though he had been my mother.

"See, there's no dog there! There's no one but me! There's no one but me!"

I continued to tremble, so he got into bed with me, held me close to him, and it was in his comforting arms that I fell asleep.

In the morning I woke to a fresh breeze and a shining sun and the chrysanthemums, orange, crimson and dun, blowing against the gray stone wall beyond the sloping lawns. So I forgot about my dream. I only knew that I loved Bob Armstrong better than anyone else on earth.

Everyone during the next days was very kind to me. I was so deeply excited by this country, so new to me, that at first I could think of nothing else. Bob Armstrong was Cumbrian

from the top of his flaxen head to the thick nails under his boots, and, in grunts and monosyllables, as was his way, he gave me the color of the ground.

There was romance everywhere: smugglers stealing in and out of Drigg and Seascale, the ancient Cross in Gosforth churchyard, Ravenglass, with all its seabirds, once a port of splendor.

Muncaster Castle and Broughton and black Westwater with the grim Screes, Black Combe, upon whose broad back the shadows were always dancing—even the little station at Seascale, naked to the seawinds, at whose bookstalls I bought a publication entitled the *Weekly Telegraph* that contained, week by week, instalments of the most thrilling story in the world.

Everywhere romance—the cows moving along the sandy lanes, the sea thundering along the Drigg beach, Bable and Scafell pulling their cloud-caps about their heads, the slow voices of the Cumbrian farmers calling their animals, the little tinkling bell of the Gosforth church—everywhere romance and beauty.

Soon, though, as I became better accustomed to the country, the people immediately around me began to occupy my attention, stimulate my restless curiosity, and especially my two uncles. They were, in fact, queer enough.

Failydyke Hall itself was not queer, only very ugly. It had been built about 1830, I should imagine, a square white building, like a thick-set, rather conceited woman with a very plain face. The rooms were large, the passages innumerable, and everything covered with a very hideous whitewash. Against this whitewash hung old photographs yellowed with age, and faded, bad water-colors. The furniture was strong and ugly.

One romantic feature, though, there was—and that was the little Grey Tower where my Uncle Robert lived. This Tower was at the end of the garden and looked out over a sloping field to the Scafell group beyond Westwater. It had been built hundreds of years ago as a defense against the Scots. Robert had had his study and bedroom there for many years and it was his domain; no one was allowed to enter it save his old servant Hucking, a bent, wizened, grubby little man who spoke

to no one and, so they said in the kitchen, managed to go through life without sleeping. He looked after my Uncle Robert, cleaned his rooms, and was supposed to clean his clothes.

I, being both an inquisitive and romantic-minded boy, was soon as eagerly excited about this Tower as was Bluebeard's wife about the forbidden room. Bob told me that whatever I did I was never to set foot inside.

And then I discovered another thing—that Bob Armstrong hated, feared and was proud of my Uncle Robert. He was proud of him because he was head of the family, and because, so he said, he was the cleverest old man in the world.

"Nothing he can't seemingly do," said Bob, "but he don't like you to watch him at it."

All this only increased my longing to see the inside of the Tower, although I couldn't be said to be fond of my Uncle Robert either.

It would be hard to say that I disliked him during those first days. He was quite kindly to me when he met me, and at meal-times, when I sat with my two uncles at the long table in the big, bare, whitewashed dining-room, he was always anxious to see that I had plenty to eat. But I never liked him; it was perhaps because he wasn't clean. Children are sensitive to those things. Perhaps I didn't like the fusty, seed-caky smell that he carried about with him.

Then there came the day when he invited me into the Gray Tower and told me about Tarnhelm.

Pale slanting shadows of sunlight fell across the chrysanthemums and the gray stone walls, the long fields and the dusky hills. I was playing by myself by the little stream that ran beyond the rose garden, when Uncle Robert came up behind me in the soundless way he had, and, tweaking me by the ear, asked me whether I would like to come with him inside his tower. I was, of course, eager enough; but I was frightened too, especially when I saw Hucking's moth-eaten old countenance peering at us from one of the narrow slits that pretended to be windows.

However, in we went, my hand in Uncle Robert's hot dry

one. There wasn't, in reality, so very much to see when you were inside—all untidy and musty, with cobwebs over the doorways and old pieces of rusty iron and empty boxes in the corners, and the long table in Uncle Robert's study covered with a thousand things—books with the covers hanging on them, sticky green bottles, a looking glass, a pair of scales, a globe, a cage with mice in it, a statue of a naked woman, an hour-glass—everything old and stained and dusty.

However, Uncle Robert made me sit down close to him, and told me many interesting stories. Among others the story about Tarnhelm.

Tarnhelm was something that you put over your head, and its magic turned you into any animal that you wished to be. Uncle Robert told me the story of a god called Wotan, and how he teased the dwarf who possessed Tarnhelm by saying that he couldn't turn himself into a mouse or some such animal; and the dwarf, his pride wounded, turned himself into a mouse, which the god easily captured and so stole Tarnhelm.

On the table, among all the litter, was a gray skullcap.

"That's my Tarnhelm," said Uncle Robert, laughing. "Like to see me put it on?"

But I was suddenly frightened, terribly frightened. The sight of Uncle Robert made me feel quite ill. The room began to run round and round. The white mice in the cage twittered. It was stuffy in that room, enough to turn any boy sick.

That was the moment, I think, when Uncle Robert stretched out his hand toward his gray skullcap—after that I was never happy again in Faildyke Hall. That action of his, simple and apparently friendly though it was, seemed to open my eyes to a number of things.

We were now within ten days of Christmas. The thought of Christmas had then—and, to tell the truth, still has—a most happy effect on me. There is the beautiful story, the geniality and kindness, still, in spite of modern pessimists, much hap-

piness and goodwill. Even now I yet enjoy giving presents and receiving them—then it was an ecstasy to me, the look of the parcel, the paper, the string, the exquisite surprise.

Therefore I had been anticipating Christmas eagerly. I had been promised a trip into Whitehaven for present-buying, and there was to be a tree and a dance for the Gosforth villagers. Then after my visit to Uncle Robert's Tower, all my happiness of anticipation vanished. As the days went on and my observation of one thing and another developed, I would, I think, have run away back to my aunts in Kensington, had it not been for Bob Armstrong.

It was, in fact, Armstrong who started me on that voyage of observation that ended so horribly, for when he had heard that Uncle Robert had taken me inside his Tower his anger was fearful. I had never before seen him angry; now his great body shook, and he caught me and held me until I cried out.

He wanted me to promise that I would never go inside there again. What? Not even with Uncle Robert? No, most especially not with Uncle Robert. This amazed me, because loyalty to his masters was one of Bob's great laws. I can see us now, standing on the stable cobbles in the falling white dusk while the horses stamped in their stalls, and the little sharp stars appeared one after another glittering between the driving clouds.

"I'll not stay," I heard him say to himself. "I'll be like the rest. I'll not be staying. To bring a child into it. . . ."

From that moment he seemed to have me very specially in his charge. Even when I could not see him I felt that his kindly eye was upon me, and this sense of the necessity that I should be guarded made me yet more uneasy and distressed.

The next thing that I observed was that the servants were all fresh, had been there not more than a month or two. Then, only a week before Christmas, the housekeeper departed. Uncle Constance seemed greatly upset at these occurrences; Uncle Robert did not seem in the least affected by them.

I come now to my Uncle Constance. At this distance of time it is strange with what clarity I still can see him—his stoutness, his shining cleanliness, his dandyism, the flower in his button-

hole, his little brilliantly shod feet, his thin, rather feminine voice. He would have been kind to me, I think, had he dared, but something kept him back. And what that something was I soon discovered: it was fear of my Uncle Robert.

It did not take me a day to discover that he was utterly subject to his brother. He said nothing without looking to see how Uncle Robert took it; suggested no plan until he first had assurance from his brother; was terrified beyond anything that I had before witnessed in a human being at any sign of irritation in my uncle.

I discovered after this that Uncle Robert enjoyed greatly to play on his brother's fears. I did not understand enough of their life to realize what were the weapons that Robert used, but that they were sharp and piercing I was neither too young nor too ignorant to perceive.

Such was our situation, then, a week before Christmas. The weather had become very wild, with a great wind. All nature seemed in an uproar. I could fancy when I lay in my bed at night and heard the shouting in my chimney that I could catch the crash of the waves upon the beach, see the black waters of Wastwater cream and curdle under the Screes. I would lie awake and long for Bob Armstrong—the strength of his arm and the warmth of his breast—but I considered myself too grown a boy to make any appeal.

I remember that now almost minute by minute my fears increased. What gave them force and power who can say? I was much alone, I had now a great terror of my uncle, the weather was wild, the rooms of the house large and desolate, the servants mysterious, the walls of the passages lit always with an unnatural glimmer because of their white color, and although Armstrong had watch over me he was busy in his affairs and could not always be with me.

I grew to fear and dislike my Uncle Robert more and more. Hatred and fear of him seemed to be everywhere, and yet he was always soft-voiced and kindly. Then, a few days before Christmas, occurred the event that was to turn my terror into panic.

I had been reading in the library Mrs. Radcliffe's "Romance of the Forest," an old book long forgotten, worthy of revival. The library was a fine room run to seed, bookcases from floor to ceiling, the windows small and dark, holes in the old faded carpet. A lamp burnt at a distant table. One stood on a little shelf at my side.

Something, I know not what, made me look up. What I saw then can even now stamp my heart in its recollection. By the library door, not moving, staring across the room's length at me, was a yellow dog.

I will not attempt to describe all the pitiful fear and mad freezing terror that caught and held me. My main thought, I fancy, was that that other vision on my first night in the place had not been a dream. I was not asleep now; the book which I had been reading had fallen to the floor, the lamps shed their glow, I could hear the ivy tapping on the pane. No, this was reality.

The dog lifted a long, horrible leg and scratched itself. Then very slowly and silently across the carpet it came toward me.

I could not scream; I could not move; I waited. The animal was even more evil than it had seemed before, with its flat head, its narrow eyes, its yellow fangs. It came steadily in my direction, stopped once to scratch itself again, then was almost at my chair.

It looked at me, bared its fangs, but now as though it grinned at me, then passed on. After it was gone there was a thick fetid scent in the air—the scent of caraway-seed.

I think now on looking back that it was remarkable enough that I, a pale, nervous child who trembled at every sound, should have met the situation as I did. I said nothing about the dog to any living soul, not even to Bob Armstrong. I hid my fears—and fears of a beastly and sickening kind they were, too—within my breast. I had the intelligence to perceive—

and *how* I caught in the air the awareness of this I can't, at this distance, understand—that I was playing my little part in the climax to something that had been piling up, for many a month, like the clouds over Gable.

Understand that I offer from first to last in this no kind of explanation. There is possibly—and to this day I cannot quite be sure—nothing to explain. My Uncle Robert died simply—but you shall hear.

What was beyond any doubt or question was that it was after my seeing the dog in the library that Uncle Robert changed so strangely in his behavior to me. That may have been the merest coincidence. I only know that as one grows older one calls things coincidence more and more seldom.

In any case, that same night at dinner Uncle Robert seemed twenty years older. He was bent, shriveled, would not eat, snarled at anyone who spoke to him and especially avoided even looking at me. It was a painful meal, and it was after it, when Uncle Constance and I were sitting alone in the old yellow-papered drawing-room—a room with two ticking clocks forever racing one another—that the most extraordinary thing occurred. Uncle Constance and I were playing draughts. The only sounds were the roaring of the wind down the chimney, the hiss and splutter of the fire, the silly ticking of the clocks. Suddenly Constance put down the piece that he was about to move and began to cry.

To a child it is always a terrible thing to see a grown-up person cry, and even to this day to hear a man cry is very distressing to me. I was moved desperately by poor Uncle Constance, who sat there, his head in his white plump hands, all his stout body shaking. I ran over to him and he clutched me as though he would never let me go. He sobbed incoherent words about protecting me, caring for me . . . seeing that that monster . . .

At the word I remember that I too began to tremble. I asked my uncle what monster, but he could only continue to murmur incoherently about hate and not having the pluck, and if only he had the courage. . . .

Then, recovering a little, he began to ask me questions. Where had I been? Had I been into his brother's Tower? Had I seen anything that frightened me? If I did would I at once tell him? And then he muttered that he would never have allowed me to come had he known that it would go as far as this, that it would be better if I went away that night, and that if he were not afraid . . . then he began to tremble again and to look at the door, and I trembled too. He held me in his arms; then we thought that there was a sound and we listened, our heads up, our hearts hammering. But it was only the clocks ticking and the wind shrieking as though it would tear the house to pieces.

That night, however, when Bob Armstrong came up to bed he found me sheltering there. I whispered to him that I was frightened; I put my arms around his neck and begged him not to send me away; he promised me that I should not leave him and I slept all night in the protection of his strength.

How, though, can I give any true picture of the fear that pursued me now? For I knew from what both Armstrong and Uncle Constance had said that there was real danger, that it was no hysterical fancy of mine or ill-digested dream. It made it worse that Uncle Robert was now no more seen. He was sick; he kept within his Tower, cared for by his old wizened manservant. And so, being nowhere, he was everywhere. I stayed with Armstrong when I could, but a kind of pride prevented me from clinging like a girl to his coat.

A deathly silence seemed to fall about the place. No one laughed or sang, no dog barked, no bird sang. Two days before Christmas an iron frost came to grip the land. The fields were rigid, the sky itself seemed to be frozen gray, and under the olive cloud Scafell and Gable were black.

Christmas Eve came.

On that morning, I remember, I was trying to draw—some childish picture of one of Mrs. Radcliffe's scenes—when the double doors unfolded and Uncle Robert stood there. He stood there, bent, shriveled, his long, gray locks falling over his collar, his bushy eyebrows thrust forward. He wore his

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old green suit and on his finger gleamed his heavy red ring. I was frightened, of course, but also I was touched with pity. He looked so old, so frail, so small in this large empty house.

I sprang up. "Uncle Robert," I asked timidly, "are you better?"

He bent still lower until he was almost on his hands and feet; then he looked up at me, and his yellow teeth were bared, almost as an animal snarls. Then the doors closed again.

The slow, stealthy, gray afternoon came at last. I walked with Armstrong to Gosforth village on some business that he had. We said no word of any matter at the Hall. I told him, he has reminded me, of how fond I was of him and that I wanted to be with him always, and he answered that perhaps it might be so, little knowing how true that prophecy was to stand. Like all children I had a great capacity for forgetting the atmosphere that I was not at that moment in, and I walked beside Bob along the frozen roads, with some of my fears surrendered.

But not for long. It was dark when I came into the long, yellow drawing-room. I could hear the bells of Gosforth church pealing as I passed from the ante-room.

A moment later there came a shrill, terrified cry: "Who's that? Who is it?"

It was Uncle Constance, who was standing in front of the yellow silk window curtains, staring at the dusk. I went over to him and he held me close to him.

"Listen!" he whispered. "What can you hear?"

The double doors through which I had come were half open. At first I could hear nothing but the clocks, the very faint rumble of a cart on the frozen road. There was no wind.

My uncle's fingers gripped my shoulder. "Listen!" he said again. And now I heard. On the stone passages beyond the drawing-room was the patter of an animal's feet. Uncle Constance and I looked at one another. In that exchanged glance we confessed that our secret was the same. We knew what we should see.

A moment later it was there, standing in the double door-

way, crouching a little and staring at us with a hatred that was mad and sick—the hatred of a sick animal crazy with unhappiness, but loathing us more than its own misery.

Slowly it came toward us, and to my reeling fancy all the room seemed to stink of caraway-seed.

“Keep back! Keep away!” my uncle screamed.

I became oddly in my turn the protector.

“It shan’t touch you! It shan’t touch you, uncle!” I called.

But the animal came on.

It stayed for a moment near a little round table that contained a composition of dead waxen fruit under a glass dome. It stayed here, its nose down, smelling the ground. Then, looking up at us, it came on again.

Oh, God!—even now as I write after all these years it is with me again, the flat skull, the cringing body in its evil color and that loathsome smell. It slobbered a little at its jaw. It bared its fangs.

Then I screamed, hid my face in my uncle’s breast and saw that he held, in his trembling hand, a thick, heavy, old-fashioned revolver.

Then he cried out:

“Go back, Robert. . . . Go back!”

The animal came on. He fired. The detonation shook the room. The dog turned and, blood dripping from its throat, crawled across the floor.

By the door it halted, turned and looked at us. Then it disappeared into the other room.

My uncle had flung down the revolver; he was crying, sniffing; he kept stroking my forehead, murmuring words.

At last, clinging to one another, we followed the splotches of blood, across the carpet, beside the door through the doorway.

Huddled against a chair in the outer sitting-room, one leg twisted under him, was my Uncle Robert, shot through the throat.

On the floor, by his side, was a gray skullcap.

Metamorphosis

BY FRANZ KAFKA

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from a troubled dream, he found himself changed in his bed to some monstrous kind of vermin.

He lay on his back, which was as hard as armor plate, and, raising his head a little, he could see the arch of his great, brown belly, divided by bowed corrugations. The bedcover was slipping helplessly off the summit of the curve, and Gregor's legs, pitifully thin compared with their former size, fluttered helplessly before his eyes.

"What has happened?" he thought. It was no dream. His room, a real man's room—though rather small—lay quiet within its four familiar walls. Over the table, where a collection of cloth samples was scattered—Samsa was a commercial traveler—hung the picture that he had recently cut from an illustrated paper and had put in a pretty gilded frame. This picture showed a lady sitting very upright, wearing a small

fur hat and a fur boa; she offered to the gaze a heavy muff into which her arm was thrust up to the elbow.

Gregor looked toward the window; rain could be heard falling on the panes; the foggy weather made him sad. "How would it be if I go to sleep again for awhile and forget all this stupidity?" he thought; but it was absolutely impossible, for he was used to sleeping on the right side and in his present plight he could not get into that position. However hard he tried to throw himself violently on his side, he always turned over on his back with a little swinging movement. He tried a hundred times, closing his eyes so that he should not see the trembling of his legs, and he did not give up until he felt in his side a slight but deep pain, never before experienced.

"God!" he thought, "What a job I've chosen. Traveling day in, day out. A much more worrying occupation than working in the office! And apart from business itself, this plague of traveling: the anxieties of changing trains, the irregular, inferior meals, the ever changing faces, never to be seen again, people with whom one has no chance to be friendly. To hell with it all!" He felt a little itch above his stomach and wriggled nearer to the bedpost, dragging himself slowly on his back so that he might more easily raise his head; and he saw, just where he was itching, a few little white points, whose purpose he could not guess at; he tried to scratch the place with one of his feet but he had to draw it back quickly, for the contact made him shudder coldly.

He returned to his former position. He said to himself: "Nothing is more degrading than always to have to rise so early. A man must have his sleep. Other travelers can live like harem women. When I return to the hotel in the morning to enter my orders, I find these gentlemen still at breakfast. I'd like to see what my boss would say if I tried it; I should be sacked immediately. Who knows if that wouldn't be a good thing, after all! If I didn't hold back because of my parents, I would have given notice long ago; I would have gone to the boss and I wouldn't have minced matters. He would have

fallen from his desk. That's a funny thing; to sit on a desk so as to speak to one's employees from such a height, especially when one is hard of hearing and people must come close! Still, all hope is not lost; once I have got together the money my parents owe him—that will be in about five or six years—I shall certainly do it. Then I'll take the big step! Meanwhile, I must get up, for my train goes at five."

He looked at the alarm clock which was ticking on the chest. "My God!" he thought; it was half-past six; quarter to seven was not far off. Hadn't the alarm gone? From the bed it could be seen that the little hand was set at four, right enough; the alarm had sounded. But had he been able to sleep calmly through that furniture-shattering din? Calmly, no; his sleep had not been calm; but he had slept only the sounder for that. What should he do now?

The next train went at seven; to catch it he must hurry madly, and his collection of samples was not packed; besides, he himself did not feel at all rested nor inclined to move. And even if he did catch the train, his employer's anger was inevitable, since the firm's errand boy would have been waiting at the five o'clock train and would have notified the firm of his lapse. He was just a toady to his boss, a stupid and servile boy. Supposing Gregor pretended to be ill? But that would be very tiresome, and suspicious, too, for during the four years he had been with the firm he had never had the slightest illness. The manager would come with the Health Insurance doctor; he would reproach his parents for their son's idleness and would cut short any objections by giving the doctor's arguments that no people are sick, only idle. And would he be so far wrong, in such a case? Gregor felt in very good fettle, apart from his unnecessary need for more sleep after such a long night; he even had an unusually keen appetite.

Just as he was quickly turning these thoughts over in his mind without being able to decide to leave the bed—while the alarm clock struck a quarter to seven—he heard a cautious knock on his door, close by his bed's head.

"Gregor," someone called—it was his mother—"It is a quarter to seven. Didn't you want to catch the train?"

What a soft voice! Gregor trembled as he heard his own voice reply. It was unmistakably his former voice, but with it could be heard, as if from below, a painful whining, which only allowed the words their real shape for a moment, immediately to confuse their sound so that one wondered if one had really heard aright. Gregor would have liked to answer fully and to give an explanation but, in these circumstances, he contented himself by saying, "Yes, yes, thank you, mother. I am just getting up." No doubt the door prevented her from judging the change in Gregor's voice, for the explanation reassured his mother, who went away, shuffling in her slippers. But because of this little dialogue the other members of the family had become aware that, contrary to custom, Gregor was still in the house, and his father started to knock on one of the side doors, softly, but with his fists.

"Gregor, Gregor," he cried, "what is the matter?" And, after a moment, in a warning tone, "Gregor! Gregor!"

At the other side door, the young man's sister softly called, "Gregor, aren't you well? Do you need anything?"

"I am getting ready," said Gregor, answering both sides and forcing himself to pronounce carefully and to separate each word with a long pause, to keep a natural voice.

His father went back to breakfast, but the sister still whispered, "Gregor, open the door, I beg you." But Gregor had no intention of answering this request; on the contrary, he complimented himself on having learned the habit of always locking his door, as if in a hotel.

He would get up quietly, without being bothered by anyone; he would dress, and, above all, he would have breakfast; then would come the time to reflect, for he felt it was not in bed that a reasonable solution could be found. He recalled how often an unusual position adopted in bed had resulted in slight pains which proved imaginary as soon as he arose, and Gregor was curious to see his present hallucination gradually dissolve. As for the change in his voice, his private opinion was

that it was the prelude to some serious quinsy, the occupational malady of travelers.

He had no difficulty in turning back the coverlet; he needed only to blow himself up a little, and it fell of its own accord. But beyond that he was impeded by his tremendous girth. To get up, he needed arms and hands; but he had only numerous little legs, in perpetual vibration, over which he had no control. Before he could bend one leg, he first had to stretch it out; and when at last he had performed the desired movement, all the other legs worked uncontrollably, in intensely painful agitation. "I must not stay uselessly in bed," said Gregor to himself.

To get his body out of bed, he first tried moving the hind part. But unfortunately this hind part, which he had not yet seen, and of which he could form no very precise idea, went so slowly it proved to be very difficult to move; he summoned all his strength to throw himself forward but, ill-calculating his course, he hurled himself violently against one of the bedposts, and the searing pain he felt showed that the lower part of his body was without doubt the most sensitive.

He then tried to start with the fore part of his body and cautiously turned his head toward the side of the bed. In this he succeeded quite easily, and the rest of his body, despite its weight and size, followed the direction of his head. But when his head left the bed and was hanging in mid-air, he was afraid to continue any further; if he were to fall in this position, it would be a miracle if he did not crack his head; and this was no moment to lose his senses—better to stay in bed.

But when, panting after his efforts, he again found himself stretched out just as before, when he saw his little legs struggling more wildly than ever, despairing of finding any means of bringing peace and order into this chaotic procedure, he once again realized that he absolutely could not stay in bed and that it was perfectly reasonable to sacrifice everything to the slightest chance of getting out. At the same time he did not forget that cool and wise reflection would be far better

than desperate resolutions. Ordinarily, at such moments he turned his eyes to the window to gain encouragement and hope. But this day the fog prevented him from seeing the other side of the street; the window gave him neither confidence nor strength. "Seven o'clock already," he said as he listened once more to the sound of the alarm clock. "Seven o'clock already, and the fog has got no thinner!" He lay back again for a moment, breathing weakly, as though, in the complete silence, he could calmly await the return to his normal self.

Then he said, "Before a quarter past it is absolutely essential for me to be up. In any case, someone will be sent from the office to ask for me before then, for the place opens at seven." And he began to rock on his back in order to get his whole body out of bed in one movement. In this manner he would be able to protect his head by raising it sharply as he fell. His back seemed to be hard; nothing would be risked by falling on it to the floor; his only fear was that the noise of his fall, which must surely resound through the whole house, might arouse terror, or, at the very least, uneasiness. However, that would have to be risked.

When Gregor had half his body out of bed—the new method seemed more like a game than a task, for he had only to swing himself on his back—he began to think how easily he could have got up if only he had had a little assistance. Two strong people—he thought of his father and the servant girl—would have been quite enough; they would have needed only to pass their arms under his round back, raise it from the bed, quickly lean forward with their burden, and then wait carefully till he had completed the operation of settling himself on the ground, where he hoped his feet would at last find a way of working together. But even if the doors had not been closed, would it have been wise for him to call for help? At this idea, despite his misery, he could not repress a smile.

Now he had progressed so far that, by sharply accentuating his swinging movement, he felt he was nearly losing his balance; he would have to take a serious decision, for in five

minutes it would be a quarter to eight—but suddenly there was a knock at the front door.

"Someone from the office," he said to himself, and he felt his blood run cold, while his little legs quickened their sara-band. For a moment all was quiet.

"They're not going to the door," thought Gregor, in an access of absurd hope. But of course the maid, with a firm tread, went to the door and opened it. Gregor needed to hear only the caller's first words of greeting to know immediately who it was—the manager himself. Why was Gregor, particularly, condemned to work for a firm where the worst was suspected at the slightest inadvertence of the employees? Were the employees, without exception, all scoundrels? Was there among their number not one devoted, faithful servant, who, if it did so happen that by chance he missed a few hours work one morning, might have found himself so numbed with remorse that he just could not leave his bed? Would it not have been enough to send some apprentice to put things right—if, in any case, it was necessary to make inquiries at all—instead of the manager himself having to come, in order to let the whole innocent family know that the clearing-up of so suspicious an affair could only be entrusted to a person of his importance? These thoughts so irritated Gregor that he swung himself out of bed with all his might. This made a loud thud, but not the terrible crash that he had feared. The carpet somewhat softened the blow, and Gregor's back was more elastic than he had thought, and so his act was not accompanied by any din. Only his head had been slightly hurt. Gregor had not raised it enough, and it had been knocked in the fall. He turned over a little to rub it on the carpet, in pain and anger.

"Something fell in there just then," cried the manager, in the room on the left. Gregor tried to imagine his employer's face if such a mishap had occurred to him; for such a thing was possible, he had to admit. But, as if in brutal reply, the manager began pacing up and down in the next room, making his patent-leather boots creak.

And in the other room on the right, Gregor's sister whispered to warn her brother, "Gregor, the manager is here."

"I know," said Gregor to himself, but he dared not raise his voice enough for his sister to hear.

"Gregor," said his father in the room on the left, "the manager has come to find out why you didn't catch the early train. We don't know what to say. He wants to speak to you personally. So please open the door. I'm sure he will be kind enough to excuse the untidiness of your room."

"Good morning, good morning, Mr. Samsa," interrupted the manager, cordial and brisk.

"He is not well," said his mother to the manager, while his father went on shouting through the door. "Believe me, he is not well, sir. How else could Gregor have missed the train? The boy thinks of nothing but his work! It makes me upset to see how he never goes out after supper; do you know he's just spent a whole week here and been at home every evening! He sits down with us at the table and stays there, quietly reading the paper or studying his timetables. His greatest indulgence is to do a little fretwork. Just lately he made a small picture frame. It was finished in two or three evenings, and you'd be surprised how pretty it is; it is hanging up in his room. As soon as Gregor opens his door, you will be able to see it. I am so glad you came, sir, because without you we would never have got Gregor to open his door, he is so obstinate; and surely he must be ill, even though he denied it this morning."

"I am just coming," said Gregor slowly and carefully, but he continued to lie still, so as not to miss a word of the conversation.

"I can offer no other suggestion," declared the manager. "Let us only hope it is nothing serious. However, we businessmen must often—fortunately or not, as you will—get on with our jobs and ignore our little indispositions."

"Well, can the manager come in now?" asked his father impatiently, rapping on the door again.

"No," said Gregor. In the room on the left there was a painful silence; in that on the right the sister began to sob.

Why did she not go to the others? Possibly she had only just got out of bed and was not yet dressed. And why did she weep? Because he did not get up to let the manager in, because he risked losing his position, and because the boss would once more worry his parents about their old debts? These were misplaced troubles! Gregor was still there and had not the slightest intention of letting his family down. At this very moment he was stretched out on the carpet, and nobody seeing him in this state could seriously have demanded that he should let the manager enter his room. But it was not on account of this slight impoliteness—for which in normal times he could easily have made his excuses later—that Gregor would be dismissed. And he thought it would be more reasonable, just now, to leave him alone rather than to upset him with tears and speeches. But it was just this uncertainty which was making the others uneasy and which excused their behavior.

“Herr Samsa,” now cried the manager, raising his voice, “What is the matter? You barricade yourself in your room, you don’t answer yes or no, you needlessly upset your parents, and you neglect your professional duties in an unheard-of manner. I am speaking in the name of your employer and of your parents, and I beg you seriously to give us a satisfactory explanation immediately. I am astonished, astonished! I took you for a quiet, reasonable young man, and here you suddenly give yourself airs, behaving in an absolutely fantastic manner! The head of the firm, speaking to me this morning in your absence, suggested an explanation which I rejected; he mentioned the samples which were entrusted to you a while ago. I gave him my word of honor that this had nothing to do with the affair, but now that I have been witness to your obstinacy, I can assure you, Herr Samsa, that it deprives me of any wish to defend you. Your job is by no means safe! I had intended to tell you this in private but, since you oblige me to waste my time here for nothing. I see no reason for keeping quiet before your parents. I’d have you know that lately your work has been far from satisfactory; we realize, of course, that the time of the year is not propitious for big business, but you must

understand, Herr Samsa, that a period with no business at all should not and can not be tolerated!"

Gregor was beside himself; in his anxiety he forgot everything else. "But, sir," he cried, "I will open the door immediately. I will open it. I felt a little ill; a slight giddiness prevented me from getting up. I am still in bed. But I feel better already. I am just getting up. Only a moment's patience. I am not quite so well as I thought. But I am all right, really. How can it be that illness should take one so quickly? Only yesterday I felt quite well, my parents can tell you; and then last evening I had a slight symptom. They must have noticed it. Why didn't I let them know at the office! But then, one always thinks one will be able to get rid of an illness without staying at home. Please, sir, spare my parents. The complaints you made just now are really without any foundation. No one has even suggested them before. Perhaps you have not seen the last orders I sent in. I will leave on the eight-o'clock train; these few moments of rest have done me a great deal of good. Please don't stay, sir, I shall be at the office immediately; and please inform the director of what has happened and put in a good word for me."

And while Gregor hastily cried these words, scarcely realizing what he said, he had, with an ease due to his previous exertions, approached the chest of drawers, against which he now tried to raise himself. He wanted to open the door; he wanted to be seen and to speak with the manager. He was curious to know what impression he would make on these people who were so imperiously demanding his presence. If he frightened them, that would be reassuring, for he would stop being cross-questioned and be left in peace. If they took everything quietly, then he, too, need not be alarmed. And if he hurried he might still catch the eight o'clock train. The chest was polished, and Gregor slipped on it several times but, by a supreme effort, he managed to get upright. He paid no attention to the pains in his stomach, though they were hurting him. He let himself drop forward onto the top of a near-by chair and clung there with his little legs. Then, finding himself master

of his body, he stayed very quiet in order to listen to what the manager had to say.

"Did you understand a word of what he said?" the manager asked the parents. "Is he trying to make fools of us?"

"Good heavens," cried the mother, already in tears. "Perhaps he is seriously ill, and here we are torturing him all this while! Grete! Grete!" she called.

"Mother!" cried the daughter from the other side. They were separated by Gregor's room.

"Fetch a doctor immediately. Gregor is ill. A doctor, quickly! Did you hear him speak?"

"It was an animal's voice," said the manager; after the cries of the women, his voice seemed curiously gentle.

"Anna, Anna!" shouted the father through the hall into the kitchen, clapping his hands. "Get a locksmith, quick!" And already the two young girls—how could his sister have dressed so soon?—ran along the corridor with rustling skirts and opened the front door. No one heard the door close; no doubt it had been left open, as is the custom in houses to which a great misfortune has come.

However, Gregor had become calmer. Doubtless they had not understood his words, though they had seemed clear enough to him, clearer, indeed, than the first time; perhaps his ears were becoming more accustomed to the sounds. But at least they were obliged to realize that his case was not normal, and they were ready, now, to help him. The assurance and resourcefulness with which the first steps had been taken comforted him considerably. He felt himself integrated into human society once again, and, without differentiating between them, he hoped for great and surprising things from the locksmith and the doctor. To clear his throat for the decisive conversation which he would have to hold soon, he coughed a little, but as quietly as possible, for he feared that even his cough might not sound human. Meanwhile, in the next room, it had become quiet. Perhaps his parents were sitting at table in a secret conference with the manager; perhaps everyone was leaning against the door, listening.

Gregor made his way slowly toward it with the chair; then he abandoned the chair and flung himself at the door, holding himself erect against the woodwork—for the bottoms of his feet secreted a sticky substance—and he rested a moment from his efforts. After this, he tried to turn the key in the lock with his mouth. Unfortunately, it seemed he had no proper teeth. How could he take hold of the key? In compensation, instead of teeth he possessed a pair of very strong mandibles and succeeded in seizing the key in the lock, regardless of the pain this caused him; a brownish liquid flowed out of his mouth, spread over the lock, and dropped to the floor.

"Listen!" said the manager in the next room. "He is just turning the key."

This was valuable encouragement for Gregor; he would have liked his father, his mother, everybody, to start calling to him, "Courage, Gregor, go on, push hard!" And, with the idea that everyone was following his efforts with passionate attention, he clutched the key with all the power of his jaws until he was nearly unconscious. Following the progress of the turning key, he twisted himself around the lock, hanging on by his mouth, and, clinging to the key, pressed it down again, whenever it slipped, with all the weight of his body. The clear click of the lock as it snapped back awoke Gregor from his momentary coma.

"I have dispensed with the locksmith," he thought, and sighed and leaned his head against the handle to open one panel of the double doors completely.

This method, the only possible one, prevented the others from seeing him for some time, even with the door open. Still erect, he had to grope his way round the door with great caution in order not to spoil his entry by falling flat on his back; so he was concentrating toward this end, with all his attention absorbed by the maneuver, when he heard the manager utter a sonorous, "Oh!" such as the roaring of the wind produces, and saw him—he was just by the door—press his hand over his open mouth and slowly stagger back as if some invisible and intensely powerful force were driving him from the spot.

His mother—who, despite the presence of the manager, was standing by with her hair in curlers, still disordered by sleep—began to look at the father, clasping her hands; then she made two steps toward Gregor and fell backward into the family circle in the midst of a confusion of skirts which spread around her, while her face, falling on her breast, was concealed from sight. The father clenched his fists with a menacing air, as if to beat Gregor back into his room; then he looked around the dining room in perplexity, covered his eyes with his hand, and wept with great sobs which shook his powerful chest.

Gregor did not enter the room; he stood against the closed half of the double doors, allowing only a part of his body to be seen, while, above, he turned his head to one side to see what would happen. Meanwhile, it had grown much lighter; on either side of the street a part of the long, dark building opposite could clearly be seen—it was a hospital, with regular windows startlingly pitting its façade; it was still raining, but in great separate drops which fell to the ground, one by one. The breakfast crockery was spread all over the table, for breakfast was the most important meal of the day for Gregor's father; he would prolong it for hours while he read various newspapers. On the wall hung a photograph of Gregor in lieutenant's uniform, taken while he was in military service; he was smiling; his hand lay on the hilt of his sword. By his expression, he seemed happy to be alive; by his gesture, he appeared to command respect for his rank. The living-room door was ajar, and, as the front door was also open, the balcony and the first steps of the stairway could just be seen.

"Now," said Gregor, and he realized that he was the only one to have kept calm, "Now I will get dressed, collect my samples, and go. Will you, will you let me go? Surely you can now see, sir, that I am not obstinate, that I do mean to work; commercial traveling is tiresome, I admit, but without it I cannot live. Where are you going, sir? To the office? Yes? Will you give them a faithful account of what has happened? After all, anyone might find for a moment that they were incapable

of resuming their work, but that's just a good opportunity to review the work they have been doing, and to bear in mind that, once the obstacle is removed, they will be able to return with twice the heart. I owe so much to the director, as you know very well. I have my parents and my sister to consider. I am in an awkward position, but I shall return to work. Only, please do not make things more difficult for me; they are hard enough as it is. Take my part at the office. I know only too well they don't like travelers. They think we earn our money too easily, that we lead too grand a life. I realize that the present situation doesn't encourage the removal of this prejudice; but you, sir, the manager, can judge the circumstances better than the rest of the staff, better than the director himself—though this is between ourselves—for in his executive capacity he is often easily misled by an employee's prejudice. You know quite well that the traveler, who is hardly ever in the office the whole year round, is often the victim of scandal, of a chance, undeserved complaint against which he is powerless to defend himself, for he does not even know that he is being accused; he only learns of it as he returns, exhausted, at the end of his trip, when the sad consequences of an affair, whose circumstances he can no longer recall, painfully confront him. Please, sir, don't leave me without a word to show that you think all this at least a little reasonable."

But, at Gregor's first words, the manager had turned away and only glanced back, with snarling lips, over his trembling shoulder. During Gregor's speech, he had not stood still for a moment; instead, he had retreated furtively, step by step, toward the door—always keeping Gregor in sight—as if some secret law forbade him to leave the room. He had already reached the hall and, as he took the very last step out of the living room, one would have thought the floor was burning his shoes, so sharply did he spring. Then he stretched his hand toward the balustrade, as if some unearthly deliverance awaited him at the foot of the stairs.

Gregor realized that, if he were to keep his job, on no account must the manager be allowed to leave in this condition.

Unfortunately, his parents did not realize the position very clearly; they had for so long held the idea that Gregor was settled in the firm for life and were so taken up with their present troubles that they had little thought for such a contingency. But Gregor had more foresight. The manager must be stopped, calmed, convinced, and finally won over. The future of Gregor and of his family depended on it! If only his sister were there! She had understood, she had actually begun to weep while Gregor still lay quietly on his back. And the manager, who liked women, would have listened to her; he would have let himself be guided by her; she would have closed the door and would have proved to him, in the hall, how unreasonable his terror was. But she was not there; Gregor himself must manage this affair. And without even considering whether he would ever be able to return to work, nor whether his speech had been understood, he let go of the doorpost to glide through the opening and overtake the manager (who was clutching the balustrade with both hands in a ridiculous manner), vainly sought for a foothold, and, uttering a cry, he fell, with his frail little legs crumpled beneath him.

Suddenly, for the first time that whole morning, he experienced a feeling of physical well-being; his feet were on firm ground; he noticed with joy that his legs obeyed him wonderfully and were even eager to carry him wherever he might wish. But while, under the nervous influence of his need for haste, he hesitated on the spot, not far from his mother, he saw her suddenly jump, fainting though she seemed to be, and throw her arms about with outspread fingers, crying, "Help, for God's sake, help!" She turned her head, the better to see Gregor; then, in flagrant contradiction, she began to retreat madly, having forgotten that behind her stood the table, still laden with breakfast things. She staggered against it and sat down suddenly, like one distraught, regardless of the fact that, at her elbow, the overturned coffeepot was making a pool of coffee on the carpet.

"Mother, mother," whispered Gregor, looking up at her. The manager had quite gone out of his mind. Seeing the coffee

spilling, Gregor could not prevent himself from snapping his jaws several times in the air, as if he were eating. Thereupon his mother again began to shriek and quickly jumped up from the table and fell into the arms of the father, who had rushed up behind her. But Gregor had no time to bother about them. The manager was already on the stairs; with his chin on the balustrade, he was looking back for the last time.

Gregor summoned all his courage to try to bring him back; the manager must have suspected something of the sort, for he leaped several steps at a single bound and disappeared with a cry of, "Huh!" which resounded in the hollow of the stair well. This flight had the unfortunate effect of causing Gregor's father—who till now had remained master of himself—to lose his head completely; instead of running after the manager, or at least not interfering with Gregor in his pursuit, he seized in his right hand the manager's walking stick, which had been left behind on a chair with his overcoat and hat, took up in his left a newspaper from the table, and began stamping his feet and brandishing the newspaper and the cane to drive Gregor back into his room. Gregor's prayers were unavailing, were not even understood; he had turned to his father a supplicating head, but, meek though he showed himself, his father merely stamped all the louder. In the dining room, despite the cold, the mother had opened the window wide and was leaning out as far as possible, pressing her face in her hands. A great rush of air swept the space between the room and the stairway; the curtains billowed, the papers rustled, and a few sheets flew over the carpet. But the father pursued Gregor pitilessly, whistling and whooping like a savage, and Gregor, who was not used to walking backward, progressed but slowly.

Had he been able to turn around, he could have reached his room quickly, but he feared to make his father impatient by the slowness of his turning and feared also that at any moment he might receive a mortal blow on his head or on his back from this menacing stick. Soon Gregor had no choice; for he realized with terror that when he was going backward he was not master of his direction and, still fearfully watching

the attitude of his father out of the corner of his eye, he began his turning movement as quickly as possible, which was really only very slowly. Perhaps his father realized his good intention for, instead of hindering this move, he guided him from a little distance away, helping Gregor with the tip of his stick. If only he had left off that insupportable whistling! Gregor was completely losing his head. He had nearly completed his turn when, bewildered by the din, he mistook his direction and began to go back to his former position. When at last, to his great joy, he found himself facing the half-opened double doors, he discovered that his body was too big to pass through without hurt. Naturally, it never occurred to his father, in his present state, to open the other half of the double doors in order to allow Gregor to pass. He was dominated by the one fixed idea that Gregor should be made to return to his room as quickly as possible. He would never have entertained the long-winded performance which Gregor would have needed to rear up and pass inside. Gregor heard him storming behind him, no doubt to urge him through as though there were no obstacle in his path; the hubbub no longer sounded like the voice of one single father. Now was no time to play, and Gregor—come what may—hurled himself into the doorway. There he lay, jammed in a slanting position, his body raised up on one side and his flank crushed by the door jamb, whose white paint was now covered with horrible brown stains. He was caught fast and could not free himself unaided; on one side his little legs fluttered in the air, on the other they were painfully pressed under his body; then his father gave him a tremendous blow from behind with the stick. Despite the pain, this was almost a relief; he was lifted bodily into the middle of the room and fell, bleeding thickly. The door was slammed by a thrust of the stick, and then, at last, all was still.

It was dusk when Gregor awoke from his heavy, deathlike sleep. Even had he not been disturbed, he would doubtless

soon have awakened, for he felt he had had his fill of rest and sleep; however, he seemed to have been awakened by the cautious, furtive noise of a key turning in the lock of the hall door. The reflection of the electric tramway lay dimly here and there about the ceiling and on the upper parts of the furniture, but below, where Gregor was, it was dark. Slowly he dragged himself toward the door to ascertain what had happened and fumbled around clumsily with his feelers, whose use he was at last learning to appreciate. His left side seemed to him to be one long, irritating scar, and he limped about on his double set of legs. One of his legs had been seriously injured during the morning's events—it was a miracle that only one should be hurt—and it dragged lifelessly behind.

When he reached the door, he realized what had attracted him: the smell of food. For there was a bowl of sweetened milk in which floated little pieces of bread. He could have laughed with delight, his appetite had grown so since morning; he thrust his head up to the eyes in the milk. But he drew it back quickly; his painful left side gave him some difficulty, for he could only eat by convulsing his whole body and snorting; also, he could not bear the smell of milk, which once had been his favorite drink and which his sister had no doubt prepared for this special reason. He turned from the bowl in disgust and dragged himself to the middle of the room.

The gas was lit in the dining room; he could see it through the cracks of the door. Now was the time when, ordinarily, his father would read aloud to his family from the evening paper, but this time Gregor heard nothing. Perhaps this traditional reading, which his sister always retailed to him in her conversation and in her letters, had not lapsed entirely from the customs of the household. But everywhere was still, and yet surely someone was in the room.

"What a quiet life my family has led," thought Gregor, staring before him in the darkness, and he felt very proud, for it was to him that his parents and his sister owed so placid a life in so nice a flat. What would happen now, if this peace, this satisfaction, this well-being should end in terror and dis-

aster? In order to dissipate such gloomy thoughts, Gregor began to take a little exercise and crawled back and forth over the floor.

Once during the evening he saw the door on the left open slightly, and once it was the door on the right; someone had wished to enter but had found the task too risky. Gregor resolved to stop by the dining-room door and to entice the hesitant visitor as best he might or at least to see who it was; but the door never opened again, and Gregor waited in vain. That morning, when the door had been locked, everyone had tried to invade his room; but now that they had succeeded in opening it no one came to see him; they had even locked his doors on the outside.

Not till late was the light extinguished, and Gregor could guess that his parents and his sister had been waiting till then, for he heard them all go off on tiptoe. Now no one would come to him till the morning, and so he would have the necessary time to reflect on the ordering of his new life; but his great room, in which he was obliged to remain flat on his stomach on the floor, frightened him in a way that he could not understand—for he had lived in it for the past five years—and, with a half-involuntary action of which he was a little ashamed, he hastily slid under the couch; he soon found that here his back was a little crushed and he could not raise his head; he only regretted that his body was too large to go entirely under the couch.

He spent the whole night there, sometimes in a half-sleep from which the pangs of hunger would wake him with a start, sometimes ruminating on his misfortune and his vague hopes, always concluding that his duty was to remain docile and to try to make things bearable for his family, whatever unpleasantness the situation might impose upon them.

Early in the morning he had a chance to test the strength of his new resolutions; it was still almost dark; his sister, already half dressed, opened the hall door and looked in curiously. She did not see Gregor at once but when she perceived him under the sofa—"Heavens, he must be somewhere; he

can't have flown away!"—she was overcome by an unmanageable terror and rushed off, slamming the door. Then, repenting her gesture, she opened it again and entered on tiptoe, as if it were the room of a stranger or one seriously ill. Gregor stretched his head out from the side of the sofa and watched her. Would she notice that he had left the milk, and not from lack of appetite? Would she bring him something which suited his taste better? If she did not do so of her own accord, he would rather have died of hunger than draw her attention to these things, despite his overwhelming desire to rush out of his hiding place, to throw himself at his sister's feet, and to beg for something to eat. But suddenly the sister saw the full bowl in astonishment. A little milk had been spilled around it; using a piece of paper, she took up the bowl without touching it and carried it off to the kitchen. Gregor waited anxiously to see what she would bring him in its place and racked his brains to guess. But he had never realized to what lengths his sister's kindness would go. In order to discover her brother's likes, she brought a whole choice of eatables spread on an old newspaper. There were half-rotted stumps of vegetables, the bones of yesterday's dinner covered with a thick white sauce, a few currants and raisins, some almonds, some cheese that Gregor, a few days before, had declared uneatable, a stale loaf, a piece of salted bread and butter, and another without salt. Besides this she brought back the bowl which had become so important to Gregor. This time it was filled with water, and, guessing that her brother would not like to eat before her, she very kindly retired, closing and locking the door to show him that he might eat in peace. Now that his meal was ready, Gregor felt all his legs trembling. His wounds seemed cured, for he felt not the slightest hindrance, and he was astonished to remember that when he had been human and had cut his finger slightly only a few months ago, it had pained him for several days after.

"Have I become less sensitive?" he wondered; but already he had begun sucking at the cheese, which had suddenly and imperiously attracted him above all the other food. Glutton-

ously he swallowed in turn the cheese, the vegetables, and the sauce, his eyes moist with satisfaction; as to the fresh things, he wanted none of them; their smell repelled him, and, in order to eat, he separated them from the others.

When he had finished and was idly making up his mind to return to his place, his sister slowly began to turn the key in the lock to give him the signal for retreat. He was very frightened, though he was half asleep, and hurried to reach the sofa. It needed great determination to remain beneath it during the time, however short, that his sister was in the room; his heavy meal had so swollen his body that he could scarcely breathe in his retreat. Between two fits of suffocation he saw, with his eyes filled with tears, that his sister, intending no harm, was sweeping up the remains of his meal with the very things that he had not touched, as if he needed them no more; she put the refuse into a bucket, which she covered with a wooden lid and hastily carried away. Hardly had she turned the handle before Gregor struggled out from his hiding place to expand his body to its proper size.

So he was fed each day; in the morning, before his parents and the maid were awake, and in the afternoon, when lunch was over and while his parents were taking their nap and the maid had been provided with some task or other by his sister. Certainly they did not wish Gregor to die of hunger but perhaps they preferred to know nothing about his meals except by hearsay—they could not have borne to see him—perhaps, also, in order to diminish their disgust, his sister was taking pains to spare them the slightest trouble. He must realize that they, too, had their share of misfortune.

Gregor never learned what excuses they had made to rid themselves of the doctor and the locksmith, for, as no one attempted to understand him, no one, not even his sister, imagined that he could understand them. He had to be content, when she came into his room, to listen to her invoking the saints between her sighs. It was only much later, when Grete had become somewhat accustomed to the new situation—to which she never really became reconciled—that Gregor would

occasionally overhear an expression which showed some kindness or allowed him to guess at such a meaning. When he had eaten all the food off the newspaper she would say, "He liked what I brought today"; at other times, when he had no appetite—and lately this had become more frequent—she would say, almost sadly, "Now he has left it all."

But even if he could learn no news directly, Gregor overheard a good deal of what was said in the dining room; as soon as he heard anyone speak, he would hurry to the most propitious door and press his whole body close against it. At first, especially, there was little conversation which did not bear more or less directly on his predicament. For two whole days, the mealtimes were given over to deliberating on the new attitude which must be maintained toward Gregor; even between meals they spoke mostly on the same theme, for now at least two members of the household always remained at home, each one fearing to remain alone and, particularly, to leave Gregor unwatched.

It was not very clear how much the maid knew of what had happened, but, on the very first day, she had fallen on her knees and begged his mother to let her go; and a quarter of an hour later she had left the house in tearful gratitude, as if her release were the greatest evidence of the kindness she had met with in the house; and of her own accord she took a long and boring oath never to reveal the secret to anyone. Now his sister and his mother had to look after the cooking; this entailed little trouble, for the appetite of the Samsa family had gone. Occasionally Gregor would hear one member of the family vainly exhorting another to eat. The reply was always the same: "Thank you, I have had enough," or some such phrase. Perhaps, also, they did not drink. Often his sister would ask her father if he would like some beer; she would cheerfully offer to fetch it, or, faced with her father's silence, she would say, to remove any scruples on his part, that the landlady could go for it, but her father would always reply with a loud, "No!" and nothing more would be said.

In the course of the very first day, the father had clearly

explained their precise financial situation to his wife and daughter. From time to time he would get up from the table and hunt for some paper or account book in his Wertheim safe, which he had saved from the crash when his business had failed five years before. He could be heard opening the complicated locks of the safe and closing it again after he had taken out what he sought. Ever since he became a prisoner, nothing had given Gregor such pleasure as these financial explanations. He had always imagined that his father had been unable to save a penny from the ruins of his business; in any case, his father had never said anything to undeceive him, and Gregor had never questioned him upon the matter; he had done all he could to help his family to forget as quickly as possible the disaster which had plunged them into such despair.

He had set to work with splendid ardor; in less than no time, from being a junior clerk he had been promoted to the position of traveler, with all the benefits of such a post; and his successes were suddenly transformed into hard cash which could be spread on the table before the surprised and delighted eyes of his family. Those were happy times—they had never since recovered such a sense of delight, though Gregor now earned enough to feed the whole Samsa family. Everyone had grown accustomed to it, his family as much as himself; they took the money gratefully, he gave it willingly, but the act was accompanied by no remarkable effusiveness. Only his sister had remained particularly affectionate toward Gregor, and it was his secret plan to have her enter the conservatory next year regardless of the considerable cost of such an enterprise, which he would try to meet in some way; for, unlike him, Grete was very fond of music and wished to take up the study of the violin. This matter of the conservatory recurred often in the brief conversations between Gregor and his sister, whenever Gregor had a few days to spend with his family; they hardly ever spoke of it except as a dream impossible to realize; his parents did not much like the innocent allusions to the subject, but Gregor thought very seriously of it and had

promised himself that he would solemnly announce his plan next Christmas eve.

It was ideas of this kind, ideas completely unsuited to his present situation, which now passed constantly through Gregor's mind while he held himself pressed erect against the door, listening. He would get so tired that he could no longer hear anything; then he would let himself go and allow his head to fall against the door; but he would draw it back immediately, for the slightest noise was noticed in the dining room and would be followed by an interval of silence.

"What can he be doing now?" his father would say after a moment's pause, turning, no doubt, toward the door; the interrupted conversation would only gradually be resumed.

His father was often obliged to repeat his explanations in order to recall forgotten details or to make them understood by his wife, who did not always grasp them the first time. Gregor thus learned, by what the father said, that, despite all their misfortunes, his parents had been able to save a certain amount from their former property—little enough, it is true, but it had been augmented, to some extent, by interest. Also, they had not spent all the money that Gregor, keeping only a few shillings for himself, had handed over to his family each week, enabling them to gather together a little capital. Behind his door, Gregor nodded his head in approval; he was so happy at this unexpected foresight and thrift. Doubtless, with these savings his father could have more rapidly paid off the debt he had contracted to Gregor's employer, which would have brought nearer the date of Gregor's release; but under the circumstances it was much better that his father had acted as he had.

Unfortunately this money was not quite sufficient to enable the family to live on its interest; it would last a year, perhaps two, but no more. It was a sum which must not be touched, which must be kept for a case of urgent necessity. As for money on which to live, that would have to be earned. Now, despite his good health, the father was nevertheless an old man who had ceased to work five years before and who could

not be expected to entertain any foolish hopes of getting employment; during these five years of retirement—his first holiday in a life entirely devoted to work and unsuccess—he had become very fat and moved with great difficulty. And the old mother would not be able to earn much, suffering as she did from asthma, for even now it was an effort for her to get about the house; she passed a good deal of her time each day lying on the sofa, panting and wheezing under the open window. And was the breadwinner to be the sister, who was still but a child, seventeen years old, so suited to the life she had led till then, nicely dressed, getting plenty of sleep, helping in the house, taking part in a few harmless little entertainments, and playing her violin? Whenever the conversation fell on this topic, Gregor left the door and lay on the leather sofa, whose coolness was so soothing to his body, burning as it was with anxiety and shame.

Often he lay all night, sleepless, and hearing no sound for hours on end save the creak of the leather as he turned. Or, uncomplainingly, he would push his armchair toward the window, crawl up on it, and, propped on the seat, he would lean against the window, not so much to enjoy the view as to recall the sense of release he once used to feel whenever he looked across the pavements; for now he was daily becoming more shortsighted, he could not even make out the hospital opposite, which he had cursed when he was human because he could see it all too clearly; and had he not known so well that he was living in Charlottenstrasse, a quiet but entirely urban street, he might have thought his window gave out on a desert, where the gray of the sky and the gray of the earth merged indistinguishably together. His attentive sister had only to see the armchair by the window twice to understand; from then on, each time she tidied the room she would push the armchair to the window, and would always leave its lower half open.

If only Gregor had been able to speak to his sister, to thank her for all she was doing for him, he could have borne her services easier; but as it was, they pained and embarrassed

him. Grete naturally tried to hide any appearance of blame or trouble regarding the situation, and as time went on she played her part even better, but she could not prevent her brother from realizing his predicament more and more clearly. Each time she entered his room, it was terrible for Gregor. Hardly had she entered, when, despite the pains she always took to spare the others the sight of its interior, she would not even take time to shut the door but would run to the window, open it hastily with a single push, as if to escape imminent suffocation, and would stand there for a minute, however cold it might be, breathing deeply. Twice a day she terrified Gregor with this rush and clatter; he shrank trembling under the couch the whole time; he knew his sister would have spared him this had she been able to stand being in the room with him with the window shut.

One day—it must have been a month after Gregor's change, and his sister had no grounds for astonishment at his appearance—she came a little earlier than usual and found him looking out of the window, motionless and in such a position as to inspire terror. If she had not liked to enter, that would not have surprised Gregor, for his position prevented her from opening the window. But not only would she not enter; she sprang back, slammed the door, and locked it; a stranger might have thought that Gregor was lying in wait for his sister, to attack her. Naturally he hid himself under the couch immediately, but he had to wait till midday for Grete's return, and, when she did come, she appeared unusually troubled. He realized that his appearance was still disgusting to the poor girl, that it would always be so, and that she must fiercely resist her own impulse to flee the moment she caught sight of the tiniest part of Gregor's body protruding from under the sofa. To spare her this sight, he took a sheet on his back, dragged it to the sofa—a task which occupied some hours—and spread it in such a way that his sister could see nothing under the sofa, even if she stooped. Had she found this precaution unnecessary, she would have taken the sheet away, for she guessed that Gregor did not so completely shut himself away for pleas-

ure; but she left the sheet where it lay, and Gregor, prudently parting the curtain with his head to see what impression this new arrangement had made upon his sister, thought he detected a look of gratitude in her face.

During the first fortnight his parents had not been able to bring themselves to enter his room, and he often heard them praising the zeal of his sister, whom they had regarded, so far, as a useless young girl and of whom they had often complained. But now, both his father and mother would wait quite frequently outside Gregor's door while his sister was tidying the room, and scarcely had she come out again before they would make her tell them in detail exactly how she had found the room, what Gregor had eaten, and, in detail, what he was doing at that moment; they would ask her, too, if there were the slightest signs of improvement. His mother seemed impatient to see Gregor, but the father and sister restrained her with argument to which she listened very attentively and with which she wholly agreed. Later, however, they had to use force, and when his mother began to cry, "Let me go to Gregor! My poor boy! Don't you understand that I must see him!" Gregor thought that perhaps it would be as well if his mother did come in, not every day, of course, but perhaps once a week; she would understand things better than his sister, who was but a child, for all her courage, and had perhaps taken on such a difficult task out of childish lightheartedness.

Gregor's wish to see his mother was soon realized. Gregor avoided showing himself at the window during the day, out of consideration to his parents; but his restricted walks around the floor did not fully compensate him for this self-denial, nor could he bear to lie still for long, even during the night; he took no more pleasure in eating, and it soon became his habit to distract himself by walking—around the room, back and forth along the walls, and across the ceiling, on which he would hang; it was quite a different matter from walking across the floor. His breathing became freer, a light, swinging motion went through his body, and he felt so elated that now

and then, to his own surprise, he would let himself go and fall to the floor. But by now, knowing better how to manage his body, he succeeded in rendering these falls harmless. His sister soon noticed his new pastime, for he left sticky marks here and there in his track, and Grete took it into her head to help him in his walks by removing all the furniture likely to be a hindrance, particularly the chest and the desk. Unfortunately, she was not strong enough to manage this on her own and dared not ask the help of her father; as for the maid, she certainly would have refused, for if this sixteen-year-old child had worked bravely since the former cook had left, it was on condition that she could stay continually barricaded in the kitchen, whose doors she would only open on special demand. So there was nothing else for it; Grete would have to enlist the mother's help one day when the father was away.

The mother gladly consented, but her exclamations of joy were hushed before Gregor's door. The sister first made sure that everything was in order in the room; then she allowed the mother to enter. In his great haste, Gregor had pulled the sheet down further than usual, and the many folds in which it fell gave the scene the air of a still life. This time he refrained from peeping under the sheet to spy on his mother but he was delighted to have her near.

"You may come in; he is not in sight," said his sister; and, taking her mother by the hand, she led her into the room. Then Gregor heard the two frail women struggling to remove the heavy old chest; the sister undertook the hardest part of the task, despite the warnings of her mother, who feared she might do herself some harm. It took a long time. They had been struggling with the chest for four hours when the mother declared that it might be best to leave it where it was, that it was too heavy for them, that they would not finish moving it before the father returned, and that, with the chest in the middle of the room, Gregor would be considerably impeded in his movements, and, finally, who knew whether he might not be displeased by the removal of his furniture?

The mother thought he would be; the sight of the bare walls

struck cold at her heart; might Gregor not feel the same, having long grown so accustomed to the furniture, and would he not feel forsaken in his empty room? "Isn't it a fact," said the mother in a low voice—she had spoken in whispers ever since she entered the room, so that Gregor whose hiding place she had not yet discovered, might not overhear, not so much what she was saying—for she was persuaded that he could not understand—but the very sound of her voice. "Isn't it a fact that when we remove the furniture, we seem to imply that we are giving up all hope of seeing him cured and are wickedly leaving him to his fate? I think it would be better to keep the room just as it was before, so that Gregor will find nothing changed when he comes back to us and will be able the more easily to forget what has happened meanwhile."

Hearing his mother's words, Gregor realized how these two monotonous months, in the course of which nobody had addressed a word to him, must have affected his mind; he could not otherwise explain his desire for an empty room. Did he really wish to allow this warm, comfortable room with its genial furniture to be transformed into a cavern in which, in rapid and complete forgetfulness of his human past, he might exercise his right to crawl all over the walls? It seemed he was already so near to forgetting; and it had required nothing less than his mother's voice, which he had not heard for so long, to rouse him. Nothing should be removed, everything must stay as it is, he could not bear to forego the good influence of his furniture, and, if it prevented him from indulging his crazy impulses, then so much the better.

Unfortunately, his sister was not of this opinion; she had become accustomed to assume authority over her parents where Gregor was concerned—this was not without cause—and now the mother's remarks were enough to make her decide to remove not only the desk and the chest—which till now had been their only aim—but all the other furniture as well, except the indispensable sofa. This was not the result of mere childish bravado, nor the outcome of that new feeling of self-confidence which she had just acquired so unexpectedly and

painfully. No, she really believed that Gregor had need of plenty of room for exercise and that, as far as she could see, he never used the furniture. Perhaps, also, the romantic character of girls of her age was partly responsible for her decision, a sentiment which strove to satisfy itself on every possible occasion and which now drove her to dramatize her brother's situation to such an extent so that she could devote herself to Gregor even more passionately than hitherto; for in a room over whose bare walls Gregor reigned alone, no one but Grete dare enter and stay.

She did not allow herself to be turned from her resolve by her mother, made irresolute by the oppressive atmosphere of the room, and who did not hesitate now to remove the chest as best she could. Gregor could bear to see the chest removed, at a pinch, but the desk must stay. And hardly had the women left the room, panting as they pushed the chest, then Gregor put out his head to examine the possibilities of making a prudent and tactful appearance. But unfortunately it was his mother who returned first, while Grete, in the side room, her arms around the chest, was rocking it from side to side without being able to settle it in position. The mother was not used to the sight of Gregor; it might give her a serious shock. Terrified, he hastened to retreat to the other end of the sofa, but he could not prevent the sheet from fluttering slightly, which immediately attracted his mother's attention. She stopped short, stood stockstill for a moment, then hurried back to Grete.

Gregor assured himself that nothing extraordinary was happening—they were merely removing a few pieces of furniture—but the coming and going of the women, their little cries, the scraping of the furniture over the floor, seemed to combine in such an excruciating din that, however much he withdrew his head, contracted his legs, and pressed himself to the ground, he had to admit that he could not bear this torture much longer. They were emptying his room, taking away from him all that he loved; they had already removed the chest in which he kept his saw and his fretwork outfit; now they were shifting his desk, which had stood so solid and fast to the floor

all the time it was in use, that desk on which he had written his lessons while he was at the commercial school, at the secondary school, even at the preparatory school. However, he could no longer keep pace with their intentions, for so absent minded had he become he had almost forgotten their existence, now that fatigue had quietened them and the clatter of their weary feet could no longer be heard.

So he came out—the women were only leaning against the desk in the next room, recovering their breath—and he found himself so bewildered that he changed his direction four times; he really could not decide what he should first salvage—when suddenly he caught sight of the picture of the woman in furs which assumed tremendous importance on the bare wall; he hastily climbed up and pressed himself against the glass, which stuck to his burning belly and refreshed him delightfully. This picture, at least, which Gregor entirely covered, should not be snatched away from him by anyone. He turned his head toward the dining-room door to observe the women as they returned.

They had had but a short rest and were already coming back; Grete's arm was round her mother's waist, supporting her.

"Well, what shall we take now?" said Grete, and she looked around. Her eyes met those of Gregor on the wall. If she succeeded in keeping her presence of mind, it was only for her mother's sake, toward whom she leaned her head to prevent her from seeing anything and said, a little too quickly and with a trembling voice, "Come, wouldn't it be better to go back to the living room for a minute?" The girl's intention was clear to Gregor: she wished to put her mother in a safe place and then to drive him from the wall. Well, let her try! He lay over his picture, and he would not let it go. He would rather leap into his sister's face.

But Grete had merely disquieted her mother; now she turned, saw the gigantic brown stain spread over the wallpaper and, before she realized that it was Gregor she was seeing, she cried, "O God! O God!" in a screaming, raucous

voice, fell on the sofa with outspread arms in a gesture of complete renunciation, and gave no further sign of life. "You, Gregor!" cried the sister, raising her fist and piercing Gregor with a look. It was the first word she had addressed to him directly ever since his metamorphosis. Then she ran to get some smelling salts from the dining room to rouse her mother from her swoon. Gregor decided to help—there was still time to save the picture—alas, he found he had stuck fast to the glass and had to make a violent effort to detach himself; then he hurried into the dining room as if able to give his sister some good advice, but he was obliged to content himself with remaining passively behind her while she rummaged among the bottles, and he frightened her so terribly when she turned around that a bottle fell and broke on the floor, a splinter wounded Gregor in the face, and a corrosive medicine flowed round his feet; then Grete hastily grabbed up all the bottles she could carry and rushed in to her mother, slamming the door behind her with her foot. Now Gregor was shut out from his mother, who perhaps was nearly dead through his fault; he dared not open the door lest he drive away his sister, who must stay by his mother; so there was nothing to do but wait, and, gnawed by remorse and distress, he began to wander over the walls, the furniture, and the ceilings so rapidly that everything began to spin around him, till in despair he fell heavily on to the middle of the huge table.

A moment passed; Gregor lay stretched there; around all was still; perhaps that was a good sign. But suddenly he heard a knock. The maid was naturally barricaded in her kitchen; Grete herself must go to the door. His father had returned.

"What has happened?" were his first words; no doubt Grete's expression had explained everything.

The girl replied in a stifled voice—probably she leaned her face against her father's breast—"Mother fainted, but she is better now. Gregor has got out."

"I was waiting for that," said the father, "I told you all along, but you women will never listen."

Gregor realized by these words that his father had misun-

derstood Grete's brief explanation and imagined that his son had broken loose in some reprehensible way. There was no time to explain. Gregor had to find some way of pacifying his father, so he quickly crawled to the door of his room and pressed himself against it for his father to see, as he came in, how he had every intention of returning to his own room immediately and that it was not at all necessary to drive him back with violence; one had only to open the door and he would quickly withdraw.

But his father was in no mood to notice these fine points. As he entered he cried, "Ah!" in a tone at once of joy and anger; Gregor turned his head away from the door and lifted it toward his father. He was astonished. He had never imagined his father as he stood before him now; it is true that for some time now he had neglected to keep himself acquainted with the events of the house, preferring to devote himself to his new mode of existence, and he had therefore been unaware of a certain change of character in his family. And yet—and yet, was that really his father? Was it really the same man who once had lain wearily in bed when Gregor had been leaving on his journeys, who met him, on his return, in his night-shirt, seated in an armchair out of which he could not even lift himself, throwing his arms high to show how pleased he was? Was this that same old man who, on the rare walks which the family would take together, two or three Sundays a year and on special holidays, would hobble between Gregor and his mother, while they walked slower and slower for him, as he, covered with an old coat, carefully set his stick before him and prudently worked his way forward; and yet, despite their slowness, he would be obliged to stop, whenever he wished to say anything, and call his escort back to him? How upstanding he had become since then!

Now he was wearing a blue uniform with gold buttons, without a single crease, just as you see the employees of banking houses wearing; above the big, stiff collar his double chin spread its powerful folds; under his bristly eyebrows the

watchful expression of his black eyes glittered young and purposefully; his white hair, ordinarily untidy, had been carefully brushed till it shone. He threw on to the sofa his cap, ornamented with the gilded monogram of some bank, making it describe the arc of a circle across the room, and, with his hands in his trouser pockets, the long flaps of his coat turned back, he walked toward Gregor with a menacing air. He himself did not know what he was going to do; however, he raised his feet very high, and Gregor, astonished at the enormous size of the soles of his boots, took care to remain still, for he knew that, from the first day of his metamorphosis, his father had held the view that the greatest severity was the only attitude to take up toward Gregor. Then he began to beat a retreat before his father's approach, halting when the other stopped and beginning again at his father's slightest move. In this way they walked several times round the room without any decisive result; it did not even take on the appearance of a pursuit, so slow was their pace.

Gregor was provisionally keeping to the floor; he feared that if his father saw him climbing about the walls or rushing across the ceiling, he might take this maneuver for some refinement of bad behavior. However, he had to admit that he could not go on much longer in this way; in the little time his father needed to take a step, Gregor had to make a whole series of gymnastic movements and, as he had never had good lungs, he now began to pant and wheeze; he tried to recover his breath quickly in order to gather all his strength for a supreme effort, scarcely daring to open his eyes, so stupefied that he could think of no other way to safety than by pursuing his present course; he had already forgotten that the walls were at his disposal, and the carefully carved furniture, all covered with festoons of plush and lace as it was. Suddenly something flew sharply by him, fell to the ground, and rolled away. It was an apple, carelessly thrown; a second one flew by. Paralyzed with terror, Gregor stayed still. It was useless to continue his course, now that his father had decided to bom-

bard him. He had emptied the bowls of fruit on the sideboard, filled his pockets, and now threw apple after apple, without waiting to take aim.

These little red apples rolled about the floor as if electrified, knocking against each other. One lightly-thrown apple struck Gregor's back and fell off without doing any harm, but the next one literally pierced his flesh. He tried to drag himself a little further away, as if a change of position could relieve the shattering agony he suddenly felt, but he seemed to be nailed fast to the spot and stretched his body helplessly, not knowing what to do. With his last, hopeless glance, he saw his door opened suddenly, and, in front of his sister, who was shouting at the top of her voice, his mother came running in, in her petticoat, for his sister had partly undressed her that she might breathe easier in her swoon. And his mother, who ran to the father, losing her skirts one by one, stumbled forward, thrust herself against her husband, embraced him, pressed him to her, and, with her hands clasped at the back of his neck—already Gregor could see no more—begged him to spare Gregor's life.

The apple which no one dared draw from Gregor's back remained embedded in his flesh as a palpable memory, and the grave wound which he now had borne for a month seemed to have reminded his father that Gregor, despite his sad and terrible change, remained none the less a member of the family and must not be treated as an enemy; on the contrary, duty demanded that disgust should be overcome and Gregor be given all possible help.

His wound had made him lose, irremediably, no doubt, much of his agility; now, merely to cross his room required a long, long time, as if he were an aged invalid; his walks across the walls could no longer be considered. But this aggravation of his state was largely compensated for, in his opinion, by the fact that now, every evening, the dining-room door was left

open; for two hours he would wait for this. Lying in the darkness of his room, invisible to the diners, he could observe the whole family gathered round the table in the lamplight, and he could, by common consent, listen to all they had to say—it was much better than before.

It must be admitted that they no longer held those lively conversations of which, in former times, he had always thought with such sadness as he crept into his damp bed in some little hotel room. Most of the time, now, they discussed nothing in particular after dinner. The father would soon settle himself to doze in his armchair; the mother and daughter would bid each other be silent; the mother, leaning forward in the light, would sew at some fine needlework for a lingerie shop, and the sister, who had obtained a job as a shop assistant, would study shorthand or French in the hope of improving her position. Now and then the father would wake up and, as if he did not know that he had been asleep, would say to his wife, "How late you are sewing tonight!" and would fall off to sleep again, while the mother and sister would exchange a tired smile.

By some capricious obstinacy, the father always refused to take off his uniform, even at home; his dressing gown hung unused in the wardrobe, and he slept in his armchair in full livery, as if to keep himself always ready to carry out some order; even in his own home he seemed to await his superior's voice. Moreover, the uniform had not been new when it was issued to him, and now each day it became more shabby, despite the care which the two women devoted to it; and Gregor often spent the evening staring dully at this coat, so spotted and stained, whose polished buttons always shone so brightly, and in which the old man slept, uncomfortably but peacefully.

As soon as the clock struck ten, the mother, in a low voice, tried to rouse her husband and to encourage him to go to bed, as it was impossible to get proper sleep in such a position, and he must sleep normally before returning to work at six the next morning. But, with the obstinacy which had characterized him ever since he had obtained his position at the bank, he would

stay at the table although he regularly dropped off to sleep, and thus it would become more and more difficult to induce him to change his armchair for the bed. The mother and sister might insist with their little warnings; he stayed there just the same, slowly nodding his head, his eyes shut tight, and would not get up. The mother might shake him by the wrist, might whisper endearments in his ear; the daughter might abandon her work to assist her mother, but all in vain. The old man would merely sink deeper in his chair. At last the two women would have to take him under the arms to make him open his eyes; then he would look at each in turn and say, "What a life! Is this the hard-earned rest of my old days?" and, leaning on the two women, he would rise painfully, as if he were a tremendous weight, and would allow himself to be led to the door by his wife and daughter; then he would wave them off and continue alone, while the mother and sister, the one quickly throwing down her pen, the other her needle, would run after him to help.

Who in the overworked and overtired family had time to attend to Gregor, except for his most pressing needs? The household budget was ever more and more reduced; at last the maid was dismissed. In her place, a gigantic charwoman with bony features and white hair, which stood up all around her head, came, morning and evening, to do the harder work. The rest was done by the mother, over and above her interminable mending and darning. It even happened that they were obliged to sell various family trinkets which formerly had been worn proudly by the mother and sister at ceremonies and festivals, as Gregor discovered one evening when he heard them discussing the price they hoped to get. But their most persistent complaints were about this flat, which was so much larger than they needed and which had now become too expensive for the family purse; they could not leave, they said, for they could not imagine how Gregor could be moved. Alas, Gregor understood that it was not really he who was the chief obstacle to this removal, for he might easily have been transported in a large wooden box pierced with a few air holes. No, what particularly

prevented the family from changing their residence was their own despair, the idea that they had been stricken by such a misfortune as had never before occurred in the family or within the circle of their acquaintances.

Of all the deprivations which the world imposes on poor people, not one had been spared them; the father took his day-time meals with the lesser employees of the bank, the mother was killing herself mending the linen of strangers, the sister ran here and there behind her counter at the customers' bidding; but the family had energy for nothing further. It seemed to poor Gregor that his wound reopened whenever his mother and sister, returning from putting the father to bed, would leave their work in disorder and bring their chairs nearer to each other, till they were sitting almost cheek to cheek; then the mother would say, pointing to Gregor's room, "Close the door, Grete," and he would once more be left in darkness, while, outside, the two women mingled their tears or, worse, sat at the table staring with dry eyes.

These days and nights brought Gregor no sleep. From time to time he thought of taking the family affairs in hand, as he once used, the very next time the door was opened; at the end of a long perspective of time he dimly saw in his mind his employer and the manager, the clerks and apprentices, the porter with his narrow ideas, two or three acquaintances from other offices, a provincial barmaid—a fleeting but dear memory—and a cashier in a hat shop, whom he had pursued earnestly but too slowly; they passed through his mind in confusion, mingled with unknown and forgotten faces; but none of them could bring help to him or his family; nothing was to be gained from them. He was pleased to be able to dismiss them from his mind but now he no longer cared what happened to his family; on the contrary, he only felt enraged because they neglected to tidy his room and, though nothing imaginable could excite his appetite, he began making involved plans for a raid on the larder, with a view to taking such food as he had a right to, even if he was not hungry. Nowadays his sister no longer tried to guess what might please him; she made a hasty

appearance twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, before going to her shop, and pushed a few scraps of food into the room with her foot; in the evening, without even bothering to see whether he had touched his meal or whether he had left it entirely—and this was usually the case—she would sweep up the remains with a whisk of the broom.

As for tidying up the room, which Grete now did in the evenings, it could not have been done in a more hasty manner. Great patches of dirt streaked the wall, little heaps of dust and ordure lay here and there about the floor. At first Gregor would place himself in the filthiest places whenever his sister appeared, so that this might seem a reproach to her. But he could have stayed there for weeks, and still Grete would not have altered her conduct; she saw the dirt as well as he but she had finally decided to take no further trouble. This did not prevent her from taking even more jealous care than ever to insure that no other member of the family should presume on her right to the tidying of the room.

Once the mother undertook to give Gregor's room a great cleaning which required several buckets of water, and this deluge deeply upset poor Gregor, crouched under his sofa in bitter immobility—but the mother's punishment soon came. Hardly had the sister, coming home in the evening, noticed the difference in Gregor's room, than, feeling deeply offended, she ran crying and screaming into the dining room, despite the appeal of her mother, who raised her hands in supplication; the father, who was quietly seated at table, leaped up, astonished but powerless to pacify her. Then he, too, became agitated; shouting, he began to attack the mother, on the one hand, for not leaving the care and cleaning of Gregor's room to the girl and, on the other hand, he forbade his daughter ever again to dare to clean it; the mother tried to draw the old man, quivering with anger as he was, into the bedroom; the daughter, shaken with sobs, was banging on the table with her little fists, while Gregor loudly hissed with rage to think that no one had the decency or consideration to close the door and thus spare him the sight of all this trouble and uproar.

But even if the sister, tired out by her work in the shop, could not bother to look after Gregor as carefully as hitherto, she could still have arranged that he should not be neglected without necessarily calling on the aid of her mother, for there was always the charwoman. This old woman, whose bony frame had helped her out of worse trouble during her long life, could not really be said to feel any disgust with Gregor. Though she was not inquisitive, she had opened his door one day and had stood with her hands folded over her stomach, astonished at the sight of Gregor, who began to trot here and there in his alarm, though she had no thought of chasing him. From that day, morning and evening, the old woman never lost an opportunity of opening the door a little to peer into the room.

At first she would call Gregor to make him come out, crying in a familiar tone, "Come on, you old cockroach!" or, "Hey, look at the old cockroach!" To such invitations Gregor would not respond; instead he remained motionless beneath his sofa as if the door had not been opened. If they had only ordered the charwoman to clean his room out each day instead of allowing her to go on teasing and upsetting him! Early one morning, when heavy rain—perhaps a sign of approaching spring—beat on the roofs, Gregor was so annoyed by the old woman as she began to bait him again that he suddenly turned on her, in a somewhat cumbersome and uncertain manner, it must be admitted, but with every intention of attacking her. She was not at all frightened of him; there was a chair by the door; she took it up and brandished it, opening wide her mouth with the obvious intention of not closing it until she had brought the chair down with a crash on Gregor's back. "Ah, is that all?" she asked, seeing him return to his former position, and she quietly put the chair back in its place.

Nowadays Gregor hardly ate at all. When, by some chance, he passed by his scraps, he would amuse himself by taking a piece of food in his mouth and keeping it there for hours, usually spitting it out in the end. At first he had thought that his loss of appetite was due to the misery into which the state of

his room had plunged him; no doubt this was a mistake, for he had soon become reconciled to the squalor of his surroundings. His family had got into the habit of piling into his room whatever could not be accommodated elsewhere, and this meant a great deal, now that one of the rooms had been let to three lodgers. They were very earnest and serious men; all three had thick beards—as Gregor saw one day when he was peering through a crack in the door—and they were fanatically tidy; they insisted on order, not only in their own room, but also, now that they were living here, throughout the whole household, and especially in the kitchen.

They had brought with them all that they needed, and this rendered superfluous a great many things about the house which could neither be sold nor thrown away, and which were now all stacked in Gregor's room, as were the ash bucket and the rubbish bin. Everything that seemed for the moment useless would be dumped in Gregor's room by the charwoman, who was always in a breathless hurry to get through her work; he would just have time to see a hand brandishing some unwanted utensil, and then the door would slam again. Perhaps the old woman intended to return and find the objects she so carelessly relegated here when she needed them and had time to search; or perhaps she meant to throw them all away some day, but in actual fact they stayed in the room, on the very spot where they had first fallen, so that Gregor was obliged to pick his way among the rubbish to make a place for himself—a game for which his taste began to grow, in spite of the appalling misery and fatigue which followed these peregrinations, leaving him paralyzed for hours. As the lodgers sometimes dined at home in the living room, the door of this room would be shut on certain evenings; however, Gregor no longer attached any importance to this; for some while, now, he had ceased to profit by those evenings when the family would open the door and he would remain shrinking in the darkest corner of his room, where the family could not see him.

One day the woman forgot to close the dining-room door, and it was still ajar when the lodgers came in and lit the gas.

They sat down at table in the places that previously had been occupied by the father, the mother, and Gregor; each unfolded his napkin and took up his knife and fork. Soon the mother appeared in the doorway with a plate of meat; the sister followed her, carrying a dish of potatoes. When their meal had been set before them, the lodgers leaned over to examine it, and the one who was seated in the middle and who appeared to have some authority over the others, cut a piece of meat as it lay on the dish to ascertain whether it was tender or whether he should send it back to the kitchen. He seemed satisfied, however, and the two women, who had been anxiously watching, gave each other a smile of relief.

The family itself lived in the kitchen. However, the father, before going into the kitchen, always came into the dining room and bowed once with his cap in his hand, then made his way around the table. The boarders rose together and murmured something in their beards. Once they were alone, they began to eat in silence. It seemed curious to Gregor that he could hear the gnashing of their teeth above all the clatter of cutlery; it was as if they wanted to prove to him that one must have real teeth in order to eat properly, and that the best mandibles in the world were but an unsatisfactory substitute. "I am hungry," thought Gregor sadly, "but not for these things. How these lodgers can eat! And in the meantime I might die, for all they care."

He could not remember hearing his sister play since the arrival of the lodgers; but this evening the sound of the violin came from the kitchen. The lodgers had just finished their meal; the middle one had brought a newspaper and had given a page to each of the others; now they all three read, leaning back in their chairs and smoking. The sound of the violin attracted their attention, and they rose and walked on tiptoe toward the hall door, where they halted and remained very close together.

Apparently they had been heard in the kitchen, for the father cried, "Does the violin upset you gentlemen? We'll stop it immediately."

"On the contrary," said the man in the middle. "Would Fräulein Samsa not like to come in and play to us here in the dining room, where it is much nicer and more comfortable?"

"Oh, thank you," said the father, as if he were the violinist.

The gentlemen walked back across the room and waited. Soon the father came in with the music stand, the mother with the sheets of music, and the sister with the violin. The sister calmly prepared to play; her parents, who had never before let their rooms, were exaggeratedly polite to the boarders and were afraid to seem presumptuous by sitting in their own chairs; the father leaned against the door, his right hand thrust between two buttons of his livery coat; but one of the gentlemen offered the mother a chair, in which she finally sat, not daring to move from her corner throughout the performance.

The girl now began to play, while her father and mother, from either side, watched the movement of her hands. Attracted by the music, Gregor had crawled forward a little and had thrust his head into the room. He was no longer astonished that nowadays he had entirely lost that consideration for others, that anxiety to cause no trouble that once had been his pride. Yet never had he more reason to remain hidden, for now, because of the dirt that lay about his room, flying up at the slightest movement, he was always covered with dust and fluff, with ends of cotton and hairs, and with morsels of stale food, which stuck to his back or to his feet and which he trailed after him wherever he went; his apathy had grown too great for him to bother any more about cleaning himself several times a day by lying on his back and rubbing himself on the carpet, as once he used to do. And this filthy state did not prevent him from crawling over the spotless floor without a moment's shame.

So far, no one had noticed him. The family was too absorbed by the music of the violin, and the lodgers, who had first stood with their hands in their pockets, very close to the music stand—which disturbed the sister a great deal as she was obliged to see their image dancing amid the notes—had at last retired toward the window, where they stood speaking together half aloud, with lowered heads, under the anxious gaze of the

father, who was watching attentively. It had become only too evident that they had been deceived in their hopes of hearing some beautiful violin piece, or at least some amusing little tune; it seemed that what the girl was playing bored them and that now they only tolerated her out of politeness. By the way in which they puffed the smoke of their cigars, by the energy with which they blew it toward the ceiling through the mouth or the nose, one could guess how fidgety they were becoming. And the sister was playing so nicely. Her face leaning to one side, her glance followed the score carefully and sadly. Gregor crawled forward a little more and put his head as near as possible to the floor to meet her gaze. Could it be that he was only an animal, when music moved him so? It seemed to him to open a way toward that unknown nourishment he so longed for. He resolved to creep up to his sister and to pull at her dress, to make her understand that she must come with him, for no one here would appreciate her music as much as he. He would never let her out of his room—at least, while he lived—for once, his horrible shape would serve him some useful purpose; he would be at all doors at once, repulsing intruders with his raucous breath; but his sister would not be forced to stay there; she must live with him of her own accord; she would sit by him on the sofa, hearing what he had to say; then he would tell her in confidence that he had firmly intended to send her to the Conservatory and had planned to let everyone know last Christmas—was Christmas really past?—without listening to any objections, had his misfortune not overtaken him too soon. His sister, moved by this explanation, would surely burst into tears, and Gregor, climbing up on her shoulder, would kiss her neck; this would be all the easier, for she had worn neither collar nor ribbon ever since she had been working in the shop.

“Herr Samsa,” cried the middle lodger, and he pointed at Gregor, who slowly came into the room. The violin was suddenly silenced, the middle lodger turned to his friends, grinning and shaking his head, then once more he stared at Gregor. The father seemed to consider it more urgent to reassure the

lodgers than to drive his son from the room, though the lodgers did not seem to be at all upset by the spectacle; in fact, Gregor seemed to amuse them more highly than did the violin. The father hurried forward and, with outstretched arms, tried to drive them into their room, hiding Gregor from them with his body. Now they began to be really upset, but it is not known whether this was on account of the father's action or because they had been living with such a monstrous neighbor as Gregor without being made aware of it. They demanded explanations, waving their arms in the air; and, fidgeting nervously with their beards, they retreated toward their own door. Meanwhile the sister had recovered from the distress that the sudden interruption of her music had caused her; after remaining a moment completely at a loss, with the violin and the bow hanging from her helpless hands, following the score with her eyes as if she were still playing, she suddenly came back to life, laid the violin in her mother's lap—the mother sat suffocating in her chair, her lungs working violently—and rushed into the next room, toward which the lodgers were rapidly retreating before Herr Samsa's onslaught. One could see how quickly, under Grete's practised hand, pillows and covers were set in order on the beds. The lodgers had not yet reached the room when their beds were already prepared, and Grete had slipped out. The father seemed so possessed by his strange fury that he had quite forgotten the respect due to lodgers.

He drove them to the door of the room, where the middle lodger suddenly came to a stop, stamping thunderously on the floor. "I wish to inform you," said this man, raising his hand and looking around for the two women, "that in view of the disgusting circumstances which govern this family and this house"—and here he spat quickly on the carpet—"I hereby immediately give up my room. Naturally, you will not get a penny for the time I have been living here; on the contrary, I am considering whether I should not claim compensation from you, damages which should easily be awarded in any court of law; it is a matter about which I shall inquire, believe me." He was silent and stared into space, as if awaiting something.

Accordingly, his two friends also spoke up: "We, too, give our notice." Thereupon the gentleman in the middle seized the door handle, and they went inside. The door closed with a crash.

The father stumbled toward his chair, put his trembling hands upon the arms, and let himself drop into it; he looked exactly as if he were settling himself for his customary evening nap, but the way his head drooped heavily from side to side showed that he was thinking of something other than sleep. All this time Gregor had stayed still on the spot where he had surprised the lodgers. He felt completely paralyzed with bewilderment at the checking of his plans—perhaps, also, with weakness due to his prolonged fasting. He feared that the whole household would fall upon him immediately; he foresaw the precise moment when this catastrophe would happen, and now he waited. Even the violin did not frighten him as it fell with a clatter from the trembling fingers of his mother, who until now had held it in her lap.

"My dear parents," said his sister, who beat with her hand on the table by way of introduction, "Things cannot go on like this. Even if you do not realize it, I can see it quite clearly. I will not mention my brother's name when I speak of this monster here; I merely want to say: we must find some means of getting rid of it. We have done all that is humanly possible to care for it, to put up with it; I believe that nobody could reproach us in the least."

"She's a thousand times right," said the father. But the mother, who had not yet recovered her breath, coughed helplessly behind her hand, her eyes haggard.

The sister hurried toward her mother and held her forehead. Grete's words seemed to have made up the father's mind, for now he sat up in his armchair and fidgeted with his cap among the dishes on the table, from which the lodgers' meal had not yet been cleared; from time to time he stared at Gregor.

"We must find a way of getting rid of it," repeated the sister, now speaking only to her father, for her mother, shaken by her coughing, could hear nothing. "It will bring you both to

the grave. I can see it coming. When people have to work all day, as we must, we cannot bear this eternal torture each time we come home at night. I can stand it no longer." And she wept so bitterly that her tears fell on her mother's face, who wiped them off with a mechanical movement of her hand.

"But what can we do, child?" said the father in a pitiful voice. It was surprising to see how well he understood his daughter.

The sister merely shrugged her shoulders as a sign of the perplexity which, during her tears, had replaced her former assurance.

"If he could only understand us," said the father in a half-questioning tone, but the sister, through her tears, made a violent gesture with her hand as a sign that this was not to be thought of.

"If only he could understand us," repeated the father—and he shut his eyes as he spoke, as if to show that he agreed with the sister that such a thing was quite impossible. "If only he could understand us, perhaps there would be some way of coming to an agreement. But as it is . . ."

"It must go!" cried the sister. "That's the only way out. You must get the idea out of your head that this is Gregor. We have believed that for too long, and that is the cause of all our unhappiness. How could it be Gregor? If it were really he, he would long ago have realized that he could not live with human beings and would have gone off on his own accord. I haven't a brother any longer, but we can go on living and can honor his memory. In his place we have this monster that pursues us and drives away our lodgers; perhaps it wants the whole flat to itself, to drive us out into the streets. Look, father, look!" she suddenly screamed, "it's beginning again!" And in an access of terror, which Gregor could not understand, she let go her mother so suddenly that she bounced in the seat of the arm-chair; it seemed as if the sister would rather sacrifice her mother than stay near Gregor; she hastily took refuge behind her father, who was very upset by her behavior and now stood up, spreading his arms to protect her.

But Gregor had no thought of frightening anyone, least of all his sister. He had merely started to turn around in order to go back to his room; but it must be realized that this looked very alarming, for his weakness obliged him to assist his difficult turning movement with his head, which he raised and lowered many times, clutching at the carpet with his mandibles. At last he ceased and stared at the family. It seemed they realized his good intentions. They were watching him in mute sadness. The mother lay in her armchair, her outstretched legs pressed tightly together, her eyes nearly closed with fatigue; the father and sister were sitting side by side, and the girl's arm was round her father's neck.

"Now, perhaps, they will let me turn," thought Gregor, and he once more set about his task. He could not repress a sigh of weariness; he was obliged to rest from time to time. However, no one hurried him; they left him entirely alone. When he had completed his turn, he immediately beat a retreat, crawling straight ahead. He was astonished at the distance which separated him from his room; he did not realize that this was due merely to his weak state and that a little before he could have covered the distance without noticing it. His family did not disturb him by a single cry, a single exclamation; but this he did not even notice, so necessary was it to concentrate all his will on getting back to his room. It was only when he had at long last reached his door that he thought of turning his head, not completely, because his neck had become very stiff, but sufficiently to reassure himself that nothing had changed behind him; only his sister was now standing up. His last look was toward his mother, who, by this time, was fast asleep.

Hardly was he in his room before the door was slammed, locked, and double bolted. So sudden was the crash that Gregor's legs gave way. It was his sister who had rushed to the door. She had stood up so as to be ready immediately and at the right moment had run forward so lightly that he had not heard her come; as she turned the key in the lock, she cried to her parents, "At last!"

"What now?" asked Gregor, looking around himself in the

darkness. He soon discovered that he could not move. This did not surprise him in the least; it seemed to him much more remarkable that such frail legs had hitherto been able to bear his weight. Now he experienced a feeling of relative comfort. True, his whole body ached, but it seemed that these aches became less and less until finally they disappeared. Even the rotted apple embedded in his back hardly hurt him now; no more did the inflammation of the surrounding parts, covered with fine dust, cause him any further discomfort. He thought of his family in tender solicitude. He realized that he must go, and his opinion on this point was even more firm, if possible, than that of his sister. He lay in this state of peaceful and empty meditation till the clock struck the third morning hour. He saw the landscape grow lighter through the window; then, against his will, his head fell forward and his last feeble breath streamed from his nostrils.

When the charwoman arrived early in the morning—and though she had often been forbidden to do so, she always slammed the door so loudly in her vigor and haste that once she was in the house it was impossible to get any sleep—she did not at first notice anything unusual as she paid her customary morning visit to Gregor. She imagined that he was deliberately lying motionless in order to play the role of an “injured party,” as she herself would say—she deemed him capable of such refinements; as she had a long broom in her hand, she tried to tickle him from the doorway. Meeting with little success, she grew angry; she gave him one or two hard pushes, and it was only when his body moved unresistingly before her thrusts that she became curious. She quickly realized what had happened, opened her eyes wide, and whistled in astonishment, but she did not stay in the room; she ran to the bedroom, opened the door, and loudly shouted into the darkness, “Come and look! He’s stone dead! He’s lying there, absolutely dead as a doornail!”

Herr and Frau Samsa sat up in their bed and tried to calm each other; the old woman had frightened them so much and they did not realize the sense of her message immediately. But

now they hastily scrambled out of bed, Herr Samsa on one side, his wife on the other; Herr Samsa put the coverlet over his shoulders, Frau Samsa ran out, clad only in her nightdress; and it was thus that they rushed into Gregor's room. Meanwhile, the dining-room door was opened—Grete had been sleeping there since the arrival of the lodgers—she was fully dressed, as if she had not slept all night, and the pallor of her face seemed to bear witness to her sleeplessness.

"Dead?" said Frau Samsa, staring at the charwoman with a questioning look, though she could see as much for herself without further examination.

"I should say so," said the charwoman, and she pushed Gregor to one side with her broom, to support her statement. Frau Samsa made a movement as if to hold back the broom, but she did not complete her gesture.

"Well," said Herr Samsa, "we can thank God for that!" He crossed himself and signed the three women to do likewise.

Grete, whose eyes had never left the corpse, said, "Look how thin he was! It was such a long time since he had eaten anything. His meals used to come out of the room just as they were taken in." And, indeed, Gregor's body was quite flat and dry; this could be seen more easily now that he was no longer supported on his legs and there was nothing to deceive one's sight.

"Come with us a moment, Grete!" said Frau Samsa with a sad smile, and Grete followed her parents into their bedroom, not without turning often to gaze at the corpse. The charwoman closed the door and opened the French windows. Despite the early hour, the fresh morning air had a certain warmth. It was already the end of March.

The three lodgers came out of their room and gazed around in astonishment for their breakfast; they had been forgotten. "Where is our breakfast?" the middle lodger petulantly demanded of the old woman. But she merely laid her finger to her mouth and signed them, with a mute and urgent gesture, to follow her into Gregor's room. So they entered and stood around Gregor's corpse, with their hands in the pockets of their

rather shabby coats, in the middle of the room already bright with sunlight.

Then the bedroom door opened and Herr Samsa appeared in his uniform with his wife on one arm, his daughter on the other. All seemed to have been weeping, and from time to time Grete pressed her face against her father's arm.

"Leave my house immediately!" said Herr Samsa, and he pointed to the door, while the women still clung to his arms.

Somewhat disconcerted, the middle lodger said with a timid smile, "Whatever do you mean?"

The two others clasped their hands behind their backs and kept on rubbing their palms together, as if they were expecting some great dispute which could only end in triumph for them.

"I mean exactly what I say!" answered Herr Samsa and, in line with the two women, he marched straight at the lodger. The latter, however, stood quietly in his place, his eyes fixed on the floor, as if reconsidering what he should do.

"Well, then, we will go," he said at last, raising his eyes to Herr Samsa as if searching, in a sudden access of humility, for some slight approval of his resolution.

Herr Samsa merely nodded several times, opening his eyes very wide. Thereupon the lodger walked away with big strides and soon reached the anteroom; his two friends, who for some while had ceased wringing their hands, now bounded after him, as if afraid Herr Samsa might reach the door before them and separate them from their leader. Once they had gained the hall, they took down their hats from the pegs, grabbed their sticks from the umbrella stand, bowed silently, and left the flat.

With a suspicion which, it appears, was quite unjustified, Herr Samsa ran out onto the landing after them with the women and leaned over the balustrade to watch the three men as they slowly, but steadily, descended the interminable stairway, disappearing once as they reached a certain point on each floor, and then, after a few seconds, coming into view again. As they went farther down the staircase, so the Samsa family's interest diminished, and when they had been met and passed by a

butcher's boy who came proudly up the stairs with his basket on his head, Herr Samsa and the women quickly left the landing and went indoors again with an air of relief.

They decided to spend the whole day resting; perhaps they might take a walk in the country; they had earned a respite and needed it urgently. And so they sat down to the table to write three letters of excuse: Herr Samsa to the manager of the Bank, Frau Samsa to her employer, and Grete to the head of her department at the shop. The charwoman came in while they were writing and announced that her work was done and that she was going. The three writers at first merely nodded their heads, without raising their eyes, but, as the old woman did not leave, they eventually laid down their pens and looked crossly at her.

"Well?" asked Herr Samsa. The charwoman was standing in the doorway, smiling as if she had some very good news to tell them but which she would not impart till she had been begged to. The little ostrich feather which stood upright on her hat and which had always annoyed Herr Samsa so much ever since the old woman had entered their service, now waved lightly in all directions.

"Well, what is it?" asked Frau Samsa, toward whom the old woman had always shown so much more respect than to the others.

"Well . . ." she replied, and she laughed so much she could hardly speak for some while. "Well, you needn't worry about getting rid of that thing in there, I have fixed it already."

Frau Samsa and Grete leaned over the table as if to resume their letter-writing; Herr Samsa, noticing that the woman was about to launch forth into a detailed explanation, cut her short with a peremptory gesture of his outstretched hand. Then, prevented from speaking, she suddenly remembered that she was in a great hurry and, crying, "Goodbye, everyone," in a peevish tone, she half turned and was gone in a flash, savagely slamming the door behind her.

"This evening we must sack her," declared Herr Samsa; but neither his wife nor his daughter answered; the old woman

had not been able to disturb their newly won tranquillity. They arose, went to the window, and stood there, with their arms around each other; Herr Samsa, turning toward them in his armchair, stared at them for a moment in silence. Then he cried, "Come, come, it's all past history now; you can start paying a little attention to me." The women immediately hurried to him, kissed him, and sat down to finish their letters.

Then they all left the apartment together, a thing they had been unable to do for many months past, and they boarded a tram which would take them some way into the country. There were no other passengers in the compartment, which was warm and bright in the sun. Casually leaning back in their seats, they began to discuss their future. On careful reflection, they decided that things were not nearly so bad as they might have been, for—and this was a point they had not hitherto realized—they had all three found really interesting occupations which looked even more promising in the future. They decided to effect what really should be the greatest improvement as soon as possible. That was to move from the flat they occupied at present. They would take a smaller, cheaper flat, but one more practical, and especially in a better neighborhood than the present one, which Gregor had chosen. Hearing their daughter speak in more and more lively tones, Herr and Frau Samsa noticed almost together that, during this affair, Grete had blossomed into a fine strapping girl, despite the make-up which made her cheeks look pale. They became calmer; almost unconsciously they exchanged glances; it occurred to both of them that it would soon be time for her to find a husband. And it seemed to them that their daughter's gestures were a confirmation of these new dreams of theirs, an encouragement for their good intentions, when, at the end of the journey, the girl rose before them and stretched her young body.

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